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# **Publishing as a conservation strategy**

## **Platforms, care and contemporary art**

Dušan Barok



Publishing as a conservation strategy. Platforms, care and contemporary art

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NEW APPROACHES IN THE CONSERVATION  
OF CONTEMPORARY ART



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## Authorship attribution statement

This thesis is partly based on the previously published articles listed below.

Chapter 1 was published in Slovak in a book collection based on a colloquium on media conservation held at the Vasulka Kitchen Brno in 2019, open access under the Creative Commons Attribution licence (Barok, 2020a).

Chapter 2, co-authored with my supervisors Julia Noordegraaf and Arjen de Vries, with me as lead author, was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Studies in Conservation*, open access under the Creative Commons Attribution licence (Barok, et al., 2019a). I wrote the manuscript and received several rounds of feedback from my co-authors on the overall structure, building the argument and wording.

Chapter 3 was published as a book chapter in the peer-reviewed book collection framed as an output of the research project New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art, open access under the Creative Commons Attribution licence (Barok, 2024).

Chapter 4 was published in Slovak in a special issue on conservation of the magazine *Flash Art CS*, open access (Barok, 2020b).

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## Introduction

Museums face significant challenges when dealing with contemporary and unconventional forms of art. These artworks often defy established notions of conservation and display. Examples may include an installation that continuously prints and stacks news on the floor, a wall-sized structure drawn in pencil, a loose ensemble of hundreds of drawings, canvases, photographs, notes and objects, a participatory website, a constructed situation involving a group of performers in a dark room, or an unannounced crowd control exercise by the horse police.<sup>1</sup> While such works come from a variety of contexts, are made by artists with different backgrounds and preferences, and use different media and strategies, they have in common the lack of a fixed physical identity. They may be based on unique material objects, but their form is unstable. Museums are faced with adapting their conservation, preservation and curatorial practices to accommodate these ever-changing and dynamic works, where the exception is the rule, preventing a straightforward adaptation of existing procedures and workflows of institutional reproduction.

A growing body of research and literature has highlighted the centrality of rigorous documentation and interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing these challenges. Works of art in museum care are recorded and documented in order to guide understanding, decisions and actions in relation to these works and their identity. The implicit aim of this process can be described as transforming works of art into manageable objects of knowledge (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). This knowledge and data is mobilised at the time of the exhibition, when conservators, together with other stakeholders, envision and discuss different options in order to determine the desired, ideal state of the work to be conserved. This involves a casuistic process of comparing and evaluating approaches to

---

<sup>1</sup> These descriptions allude to the following works: Hans Haacke, *News*, 1969 (the SFMOMA collection); Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #120*, 1971 (Kröller-Müller Museum); Anna Oppermann, *Being different ("Somehow she is so different ...")*, 1970-1986 (K21 Düsseldorf); Martine Neddam, *Mouchette*, 1996 (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam & MOTI); Tino Sehgal, *This Variation*, 2012 (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam); and Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008 (Tate).

Hans Haacke  
*News, 1969/2008*

**Artwork Info**

<b>Artwork title</b>	News	<b>Date acquired</b>	2008
<b>Artist name</b>	<a href="#">Hans Haacke</a>	<b>Credit</b>	Collection SFMOMA
<b>Date created</b>	1969/2008	Purchase through gifts of Helen Crocker Russell, the Crocker Family, and anonymous donors, by exchange, and the Accessions Committee Fund	
<b>Classification</b>	installation	© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn	
<b>Medium</b>	RSS newsfeed, paper, and printer	<b>Copyright</b>	
<b>Dimensions</b>	dimensions variable	<b>Permanent URL</b>	<a href="https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2008.232">https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2008.232</a>

**Artwork status**  
Not on view at this time.

**Audio Stories**

Extra! Extra! What's printed on these pages?

00:00 02:23

Show Transcript ▾

Figure 1. Hans Haacke, *News, 1969/2008*. Newsfeed, paper, and printer. Website screenshot (detail), SFMOMA.org. <https://sfmoma.org/artwork/2008.232/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

the broad questions posed by the artworks. To take the first example mentioned above, Hans Haacke's *News* (1969) alone illustrates how interpretive and subjective this process becomes: Which press agencies should be included as sources for the news? Is it fine to include news in the local language? Is it fine to use a more modern printer to reduce noise levels? Should printing be continuous or intermittent? How will the news be sent to the printer? Can the audience inspect the messages with their hands? The toner and paper roll will probably last all day? How will the pile be maintained? Is its angle in the room important? Can the printer be hung rather than placed on a table? Needless to say, the work has been shown many times over the past decades, and it rarely looks the same.

Documentation needs to be organised in some way to support this decision-making process. However, it is often complex enough to involve a variety of cataloguing and information systems and files, digital or otherwise. Rather than serving as a common pool of knowledge, the museum infrastructure is a heterogeneous array of cards, forms, files, folders, systems and databases (Green & Mustalish, 2009; Taormina & Baraldi, 2022). In addition, digital components of art objects, such as the software element in *News*, may reside on memory cards, repositories, websites or the cloud. All of these elements are subject to access management and intellectual property rights. Staff within an institution have different competencies and departmental affiliations with different responsibilities that determine which parts of the infrastructure they can engage with. Recording knowledge and data does not automatically translate into availability and accessibility. This is a problem because fragmented documentation and barriers to collaboration have a negative impact on the institution's ability to produce and process information that shapes objects and places them in context. Acting from a position of authority, it is then not only the museum that is affected, but also wider processes of cultural reproduction.

The stakes are high. Pragmatic considerations about the practicalities of reinstalling works in a gallery setting can lead to a reframing of the work itself. Preserving a work with respect for its original context and its biography is not always a given, and it's not something that artists take for granted. Hans Haacke, for his part, pointed to the misuse of the museum's authority in the process of removing art from its



Figure 2. Hans Haacke, *News*, 1969. Reproduced in the catalogue for the exhibition *Software* held at the Jewish Museum, New York (Burnham, 1970: 34).

social context (AWC, 1969a: 46-7). Twenty-five years later, in a conversation with the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, he still found this practice commonplace: “The most accepted [museum] practice remains that of decontextualizing objects, a bit like the presentation of a butterfly collection. It circumvents, by default, the consideration of the social field in which they originated and to which their creators made reference. This is undoubtedly a politically smart practice. But it ends up in a neutralization of art” (Bourdieu & Haacke, 1995: 98). Haacke’s enduring concern underscores the delicate balance between preserving the art

object and preserving its inherent meaning within the broader social fabric, a challenge that continues to resonate today.

In a sense, *News* itself can be seen as both a metaphor and a constructive critique of this very phenomenon. The work emerged in a climate characterised by the conviction that “power resides less in the control of the traditional symbols of wealth than in information” (Burnham, 1968). It implied viewing “the world through wholes and interactions rather than discrete parts”, shifting attention from objects to systems. Open and complex systems offered a corrective to an increasingly technocratic and automated postwar society (Buchmann, 2006). Rather than whole entities maintaining a closed organisation, systems were increasingly understood as “complex, emergent, and in a state of [...] ‘dynamic equilibrium’, in which a system, open to its environment, continually changes its components in order to maintain its organization” (Gosse & Stott, 2022: 12). As an artist, Haacke saw them as an imperative: “[t]he working premise is to think in terms of systems; the production of systems, the interference with and the exposure of existing systems. Such an approach is concerned with the operational structure of organization, in which the transfer of information, energy and/or material occurs” (Haacke, 1970: 44). For his work, this meant transforming the ontology of the artwork from a discrete object to “an integrated and dynamic complex of elements—semiotic, visual, graphic, discursive, mechanical, or affective—and acting in relation to other artworks and to its environment” (Gosse & Stotte, 2022: 13). In addition to its role as a ‘retinal’ object, the artwork also assumes agency as a medium of information, entering the dialectic between aesthetic autonomy and political instrumentality (Buchloh, 2000: 208-9).

*News* is one such work, conceived as a system that draws the attention from the inner circuit of the gallery to the wider socio-political environment. Created at the height of the protests against the Vietnam War, the first war to be televised (Mandelbaum, 1982: 157), *News* brings ‘live’ information from world news into the gallery, emphasising that museums are part of the public sphere. Haacke explicitly described the work as a “way to break down the barrier between what is presumed to be this secluded and holy sphere of what we call art from the rest of the world, which is dirty politics” (Haacke, 2008). The details of what actually

happened to *News* in the care of a museum are the subject of a case study in Chapter 3, while here it illustrates the importance artists attach to delegating agency over their work to an institution. It is not only systems art, but also installations, performances and digital art in general that highlight the gravity of the museum, as their custodian, becoming a crucial factor in shaping what they become.

This brings us to the question of who has what say and which voices are heard in deciding how the work is presented to the public. The recognition of the value to museums of contact with living artists has been an integral part of contemporary art conservation since its inception, in the form of collecting documentation through interviews and exchanges, driven by the negotiation of the artist intent behind the work. In this delicate balancing act between artist and museum, conservators are entrusted with the task of coordinating the creation and maintenance of documentation to support the preservation of the work, which resists fixation in single objects. As more complex objects enter museums and technical standards change, institutions register, catalogue, document, store and archive artworks and their components in complex and ever-changing networks of systems and according to diverse protocols. How do they reconcile their reliance on a fragmented infrastructure of institutional memory with artists' demands for contextual integrity without compromising their status as custodians of heritage? Would it be possible to think with *News* in terms of an open system and to conceive of their complex systems of accumulating and processing information also as emergent and open to their environment?

## Theory and method

This thesis starts from the premise that much contemporary art has an unstable form that contributes to the fragmentation of the infrastructure that supports institutional memory. This raises a question central to this thesis: how do museums reconcile their documentation practices with artists' demands for the contextual integrity of their works in museum care? This dilemma embodies the intricate dichotomy inherent in the role of contemporary museums: preserving artistic heritage while

accommodating the changing nature of artistic expression, all the while upholding cultural legacy.

To conceptualise the role of knowledge infrastructure in contemporary art museum care, the theoretical framework of this thesis needs to draw on several disciplines. The general question of the transformation of a work of art into a museum object is explored in museology. Conservation studies, and in particular the field of contemporary art conservation, provides a framework for theorising practices surrounding the preservation of unstable artworks. Finally, the role of knowledge infrastructures has been explored in media studies.

Museology provides a framework that identifies the specificity of the status of objects in museums, including art museums, as undergoing a process of musealisation (Stránský, 1995). The conceptualisation of this process has been fundamental to museology and remains one of its theoretical pillars (ICOM, 2010: 50-2). It equates authentic documentation with the tangible object, which is seen as the primary witness. In its absence, museums rely on non-authentic, or ‘primary’, ‘ancillary’, and ‘secondary’ documentation (Stránská & Stránský, 2000: 65-6; Rutar, 2012: 9). In this sense, musealisation aims to establish museum objects so that they can serve as “inexhaustible [...] authentic sources [of] knowledge and information” about “musealised phenomena” (Stránská & Stránský, 2000: 65).<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes musealisation from other forms of preservation is the decisive moment of transition from reality to the cultural realm, or “the acquisition of the museum quality” (Brulon Soares, 2016). In this regard, Domínguez Rubio (2014) describes art museums as ‘objectification machines’ that seek to transform and stabilise artworks as meaningful objects that can be exhibited, classified and circulated.

The conceptual framework, which sees the museum object as a representation of reality, has also been outlined in ICOM's official publications. According to this reasoning, museums select objects “according to their potential as evidence, that is the quality of information (markers) that they can provide to reflect the ecosystems or cultures

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<sup>2</sup> Author's translation. Museology equates authentic documentation with the tangible object. In its absence, museums rely on non-authentic, or primary, ancillary, and secondary, documentation. Primary witnesses are fixed in individual objects (Stránská & Stránský, 2000: 65-6; Rutar, 2012: 9).

[whose] traces they wish to preserve" (ICOM, 2010: 62). Objects are then "extract[ed], physically or conceptually, [...] from [their] natural or cultural environment and [given] a museal status" (50). In this way, they "can be studied much better than if they were still in their original context" (62). As a result of this liquidation of 'aura' (Benjamin, 2007: 221), separation (Malraux, 1974), suspension (Déotte, 1986), decontextualisation (Rutar, 2012: 8), or even looting (Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017), objects "change their status when they enter the museum. We are no longer in the real world, but in the imaginary world of the museum" (ICOM, 2010: 62). Objects become documents with museum value. Museum objects may have ontological correspondences with original objects, but rather than being the same, they have the status of 'authentic documentation.' "A museum object is no longer an object to be used or exchanged, but now delivers authentic evidence of reality" (ICOM, 2010: 51). This perspective may imply that museums act as arbiters of scientific objectivity, with museum objects serving as "mirrors of reality" (Gregorová, 1980).

However, the recognition of the inherent role of interpretation in musealisation, and, by extension, the agency and subjects involved therein, has led to a rethinking of the status of the museum object and a growing emphasis on the social function of the museum. Following cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's interpretation of cultural performance (1988: 42), Bralon Soares (2016, 2017) outlines reflexive museology, which sees museums as "magical mirrors of social reality," because they are "capable of exaggerating, inverting, re-formatting, magnifying, minimizing, and even falsifying the known chronicled" reality (Bralon Soares, 2016: 22). This perspective also resonates with the concept of the constituent museum, where "a constituent relationship [is considered] as being one of collaboration and co-production" (Byrne et al., 2018: 11). It is further embodied in ICOM's new definition of the museum as an "institution in the service of society, [operating] with the participation of communities" (ICOM, 2022). Rather than seeing themselves as detached observers documenting reality, museums are called upon to locate and centre their role in relation to their social constituencies.

The process of musealisation involves the selection and conservation of an object, so that it can be displayed and studied in a

museum setting. Objects in galleries and art centres in general are also subject to selection, display and research. What distinguishes the museum objects is the aspect of conservation. Conservation is one of the least visible professions in the visual arts (Miller, 2021b), but one that is also closely intertwined with exhibition activity and whose framework largely determines what art can be entrusted to museums.

The role of conservation has been traditionally understood as reversing the deterioration of objects and “maintain[ing] them as nearly as possible in an unchanging state” (ICOM-CC, 1984: 2.1). As a discipline, it has adhered to the principles of impartiality and objectivity, synonymous with ‘minimal intervention’ (Villers, 2004).<sup>3</sup> In essence, it expects conservators-restorers to carry out a scientific analysis of material changes in order to determine the interventions necessary to restore the original state. While this approach is relevant for the restoration of singular material objects such as buildings, paintings and sculptures, the original state of installations, performance or digital art has often irreversibly passed.

Moving beyond an emphasis on the material aspects of objects, Laurenson (2006) has outlined an ontology for art conservation that recognises change as integral to the identity of the art object. This framework understands the authentic realisation of an installation as honouring its so-called work-defining properties. Rather than seeking to return the object to its original state, it opens up space for interpretation. Conservators are therefore turning to time-based, biographical approaches to account for the variability of artworks while respecting their integrity.<sup>4</sup> The argument goes that “the meaning of an object and the effects it has on people and events may change during its existence” (van de Vall, et al., 2011). They challenge the two established milestones for decision-making in traditional art conservation - when the work left the studio and when it entered the collection. In many cases, the work exists

3 Cf. the steady increase in the occurrence of the phrase ‘minimal intervention’ since the 1940s in literature digitised by Google Books,  
[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?  
 content=minimal+intervention&year\\_start=1900&year\\_end=2019](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=minimal+intervention&year_start=1900&year_end=2019), accessed 16 October 2023.

4 The metaphor of human life may be unscientific, but it's been used by conservators for decades (van de Vall, et al., 2011).

as concepts before realisation and does not have to be realised in the studio first, while it also may continue to change after entering the collection. The more relevant milestones are reinstallations.

In this respect, van Saaze (2013) argues that the relationship between artist intent and the reinstallation of the work is not unidirectional, but that authenticity and intent are ‘made’, constructed through documentation, interviews with the artist and discussions with the wider team and experts who are thus involved in the creative process. In other words, “for the conservation of contemporary art, the ‘artist’s intent’ is reframed as a collaborative process that evolves over time, as guidelines which are negotiated by the artist together with other stakeholders to determine what elements of a work of art signify and how we are to work towards their continuation” (Kiliszek & Quabeck, 2021). The answers about the artwork do not lie in the object alone, nor do they end with the artist’s statement of intent. Conservators are then faced with a situation in which the artist’s intent, but also the authorship, is not something that is given at the moment of the work’s creation (Quabeck, 2019; Giebel, et al., 2021). In contrast to the perspective of preserving the work by freezing it in a singular state, Van Saaze (2013) argues for practical and interventionist forms of engagement by museum staff. According to philosopher Renée van de Vall (2015), this is what distinguishes the paradigm of performative conservation from traditional, scientific conservation.

The transformative effect of changing works on perceptions of authorship and the role of conservation is not limited to installations. Frieling (2014) and Dekker (2018) write about examples of site-specific, relational and performative works. According to Dekker, while the artist is an important aid in the process of restaging the work, the museum takes on the role of facilitator for the group of people who have formed around the work to continue it, in other words, its ‘network of care’ (Dekker, 2018: 119). Similar forms of distribution of authorship for preservation purposes have been discussed in terms of proliferative, open, and community-based conservation (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014: 163-5; Dekker, 2018: 115-6; Wharton, 2011: 10-14, 164-174). These also resonate with the social turn in museology discussed above. In this vein, Van de Vall (2015) speaks of a processual conservation paradigm, distinct from scientific

conservation where the focus is on the material integrity of the work as a physical object. It also differs from the performative paradigm in that it does not rely entirely on the conceptual identity of the work, which is expressed as a set of instructions. Processual works are affected by uncontrollable factors like material wear, weather, audience interaction and participation. In this context, the aim of conservation is to support the continuation of the work by transferring the necessary skills, procedures and information to those involved.

A key conservation practice that supports this knowledge transfer is documentation (Dekker, 2013; Matos, et al., 2015; Barok, et al., 2019b; Barok, 2022; Falcão, et al., 2022). Documentation is integral to art conservation,<sup>5</sup> and its role has become even more important with the introduction of artworks with unstable media into museum collections (Berndes, 1999). Over the past few decades, numerous models and guidelines for the documentation of contemporary art have been developed by consortia of museums, universities, studios and labs.<sup>6</sup> In these models, researchers aim to translate the processes of collection care into conceptual schemes.<sup>7</sup> Although they vary widely, the often repeated concern of documentation is to capture the artist's intent, intended behaviour, spatial and technical dependencies, criteria for non-dedicated equipment as well as past iterations. As a result, artist instructions, interviews and correspondence, photographs and videos of exhibitions, reports, manuals and sketches are produced by different stakeholders and in a variety of formats.

In this process, the documentation inadvertently becomes an object of preservation along with the works themselves. Various infrastructures exist in museums to host and organise this documentation. They are also found outside the museum, with the rise of collaborative software and social media, and have been examined as knowledge infrastructures in

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5 The necessity of documenting museum collections in the context of conservation is codified in the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (“The Venice Charter”) from 1964 (Article 16) and in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums (Article 2.20 in ICOM, 2017).

6 For an overview of research projects, see <https://monoskop.org/Art/Care#Research>, accessed 16 October 2023.

7 Models such as the Variable Media Questionnaire, DOCAM and Matters in Media Art are discussed in Chapter 2.

infrastructure studies (Edwards et al., 2013). Rather than treating knowledge in terms of facts, theories and ideas - mental things carried around in people's heads or recorded in publications - the infrastructure perspective sees knowledge as a persistent, shared socio-technical system. Edwards (2010) defines knowledge infrastructures as "robust networks of people, artifacts, and institutions that generate, share, and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural worlds" (17). However, these systems have critical limitations when it comes to dealing with non-object-based artworks in museum practice, due to the heterogeneity and specificity of the data.<sup>8</sup>

Media scholars have pointed to the 'platformisation' of knowledge infrastructures (Plantin et al., 2018a; Borgman et al., 2020), where platforms are defined by an architecture that enables the programmability and reuse of content and data (Helmond, 2015). Plantin, et al. (2018b) articulate the dynamics of the de-integration of knowledge infrastructures as facilitating the rise of digital platforms. These have been studied not only as social media but also content-sharing websites (Gillespie, 2010) and networked organisations (Goriunova, 2011).

Central to this thesis are digital platforms facilitating the process of musealisation. To understand the process of organising museum documentation on digital platforms, I build on a theory of editing involving the selection of content from different sources, the shaping of language and structure, and the linking of the content within the overall context of the page (Greenberg, 2018). I further build on Bhaskar's (2013) theory of publishing in order to conceptualise publishing as a means of preserving artworks beyond traditional museum collections and gallery exhibitions.

To study museum practices that involve digital platforms to support the display and conservation of artworks, I use ethnographic methods widely adopted in both media and heritage studies. In the context of museums, ethnographic methods may be used to study the ways in which museum professionals interact with objects of their study and with each other, the processes of attaching meaning and decision-making, and the ways in which museums construct and present objects and knowledge (van Saaze, 2013: 29-30). My fieldwork involved participant observation,

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<sup>8</sup> These are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

semi-structured interviews around digital platforms in their socio-technical environments, as well as archival research.<sup>9</sup>

I build on the tradition of case-based research in conservation. The thesis is based on a series of case studies representing different domains of organising conservation documentation, namely within an institution (Chapter 2), between institutions (Chapter 3), and towards the public sphere (Chapter 4). They are drawn from the milieu of collection care initiatives dealing with contemporary art. I conducted research residencies at two institutions. At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art I studied the SFMOMA MediaWiki (Chapter 2). At the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) I focused on the platform of the International Network for Contemporary Art, INCCA (Chapter 3). These are complemented by a comparative case analysis of platforms run by the non-profit organisations Rhizome and LIMA, called Digital Canon and Net Art Anthology, respectively (Chapter 4). The central object of study for all these initiatives is cultural heritage that poses a range of problems that require specific expertise. My focus is therefore not only on approaches to organising documentation, but also on the configuration of the cross-disciplinary setting in which this takes place.

## **Structure and outline**

Chapter 1 aims to situate the institutional landscape of conservation by focusing on processes of alliance-building in the context of contemporary art conservation as a community of practice. It shows that artist-run initiatives and museums have formed collaborative preservation projects for decades. From the outset, they have responded to diverse challenges posed by video, installation, and later digital art. Among the most prominent are the impermanence and ephemerality of materials, the obsolescence of software and hardware components of art objects, and the need to preserve the artist's intent in the presentation of the work. The emerging discourse of contemporary art conservation has been shaped by

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9 The interviews, consent forms and field notes are stored in the NACCA project research database in the UvA-AUAS Figshare repository,  
<https://figshare.com/account/projects/194213/articles/25119608>.

theorising the shift from preserving materially based authenticity to interpretation, as well as the increasing importance of documentation. The concept of allography has been introduced to distinguish between the conceptual identity and spatio-temporal iterations of an art object. This has led to the emergence of iterative and reflective approaches to documentation.

Chapter 2 discusses the scale of the issues involved in the care of a media installation in a large-scale museum, SFMOMA, focusing on the role of collaboration and documentation. I explore their different aspects, highlighting the establishment of a cross-departmental working group and the adoption of a content management system as a site for the collaborative synthesis of practical knowledge relevant to the reinstallation of these works. Documenting art objects on a digital platform opens up ways of bringing together the many voices of conservators, registrars, curators and technicians in articulating the contributions of their own professions to the meaning and significance of the works in their care. I describe how the process of creating an artwork's digital dossier entails the shaping of documentation in both content and form. This has parallels in the established procedures of editing, which involve the selection, shaping and linking of content. I suggest that by compiling and organising relevant knowledge and documentation about objects in this environment, museum workers take on the role of editors. I explore the implications of editing on musealisation further in Chapter 4.

While the previous chapter explored the conditions within a museum, Chapter 3 broadens the focus to collaboration and documentation exchange between institutions. I examine a landmark initiative in this field, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), placing it in a historical context, identifying a number of motivations that have shaped its mission and form, and analysing how the rationale for collaboration in the care of collections has shifted over its two decades of existence. Not tied to a specific collection, INCCA is situated as a knowledge network facilitated by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. It was established as a digital repository for the exchange of artist interviews and documents among professionals in the evolving field. I identify INCCA as a research-based

initiative and recognise its role in consolidating the conservation of contemporary art as a discipline. In the process, the means of exchange shifted from the circulation of data in the network to publicly oriented knowledge production: research publishing.

Chapter 4 follows this shift through an analysis of preservation initiatives that operate online platforms. Projects such as Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon can be loosely described as permanent online exhibitions of works, together with their contexts and selected documentation. Some platforms present artworks as case studies—as vehicles for discussing conservation dilemmas and theoretical issues. Others take a more curatorial approach to presenting works. What they have in common is the activation of conservation research to perpetuate artworks through digital publishing. More specifically, they combine exhibition display and research publishing, building on the traditions of the collection catalogue and the scholarly monograph. Although these research catalogues contain a wealth of data and information, they are primarily article-based, providing a narrative interpretation of memory and knowledge about artworks on a case-by-case basis. Whether they're facilitated by a museum, a nonprofit or a university, they are usually not limited to one or more collections, but rather facilitate relations in their networks of care.

The concluding Chapter 5 returns to the relationship between digital platforms and the process of musealisation. The platforms used to facilitate the recontextualisation and perpetuation of works of art rest on a network of care. This network is facilitated and maintained by a host organisation, be it a collective or an institution. By spatially combining the aspects of exhibition display and research publishing, platforms can enable works to have a more active agency in social and institutional memory. Their collections are not necessarily tied to ownership, but rather to the right of use and presentation in the digital space. They offer an alternative view of musealisation that takes into account the distributed nature of an art object while maintaining the centrality of authentic documentation. I argue that platforms of care have the capacity to grant the artists, collaborators, caretakers, and even institutions involved in continuing the work the status of primary witnesses, or living ‘authentic documentation.’



## Chapter 1

### **Artists and museums. Situating conservation as a community of practice<sup>10</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on alliance-building in the context of contemporary art conservation as a community of practice in response to the challenges of establishing the changing artwork as a museum object, its musealisation. Conservation plays a key role in the life cycle of these works within the institution, since their acquisition, exhibition and even existence depend on their proper documentation and maintenance. Conservation acts as a foundation that also provides the necessary conceptual framework and legitimises the museum as a scientific institution in its own right.

The discourse around the conservation of contemporary art has been significantly shaped by a conceptual shift from a prioritisation of the preservation of material authenticity to the adoption of an interpretive paradigm. Adopting this perspective inherently calls into question one's own agency in shaping the art object. What if decisions can't be confined to one conservator or one museum? It demands an approach that involves multiple stakeholders and even institutions. The ethos of forging alliances and collaborative partnerships in turn reinforces the role of communication and documentation in conservation efforts. It also implies a case-by-case approach to works of art.

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<sup>10</sup> This chapter is based on Barok, D. (2020). Prístupy k uchovávaniu súčasného umenia. Video, inštalácie, digitálne umenie a otázky mediálnej konzervácie. In M. Vojtěchovský (Ed.), *Vasulka Kitchen Cooking Reader #1: Beyond Media Texts* (pp. 29-48). Brno: Vašulka Kitchen Brno.

In this environment, the process of establishing the artwork as a museum object is complicated by the involvement of multiple parties. This complexity highlights the need for an approach to musealisation that recognises the influence of different actors in shaping the narrative of the artwork within the museum environment. This challenge requires interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration, in which artists play a crucial role. Their involvement is essential in order to safeguard the intention and identity of the artworks. Maintaining the conditions for exchange between the various parties, facilitated by the sharing of information and knowledge, becomes central to the care of the artworks.

## **Dematerialisation and temporalisation of the art object**

This section aims to situate artists' insistence on maintaining the contextual integrity of their works within museum settings. The roots of this demand can be found in the historical circumstances that contested the autonomy of both artist and artwork. The process of institutionalising modern and contemporary art is intricately intertwined with the positioning of museums as neutral spaces for constructing a coherent history of art. This process implied extracting artworks from their socio-cultural contexts and transforming them into independent entities embodying an immanent stylistic development (Kantor, 2001). Artists directly challenged this paradigm by drawing attention to the ways in which their artworks were being used, particularly in terms of the economic and political agendas they inadvertently served (Fraser, 2005). The demand of maintaining artistic control in the process of musealisation has provoked different responses. One response has been to reform art institutions and create alternative platforms for the display and circulation of art. Another was a transformation of artistic practice itself, manifested in the dematerialisation and temporalisation of the art object. As I will show, artists sought to undermine the commodity status of the object by shifting the focus to concepts, experiences and temporalities that resisted easy instrumentalisation and inadvertently opened up a rethinking of musealisation.

With the establishment of the Museum of Living Artists as a contemporary counterpart to the Louvre in 1818, a new avenue was opened for artists to have their works showcased within a museum's collection during their own lifetimes. This marked a significant departure from the prevailing practice at the time, which often reserved such recognition for artists posthumously.<sup>11</sup> Museums remained tethered to traditional artistic norms for a substantial period of time. It wasn't until the very end of the 19th century that institutions began to embrace the avant-garde movement.<sup>12</sup> This gradual acceptance of more experimental and innovative forms of artistic expression may have indicated a broader societal shift towards valuing non-conformity and pushing artistic boundaries. Situated in major institutions, however, the layers of meaning and relevance of works were not prone to neutralisation and instrumentalisation. In the context of October Revolution, for example, avant-garde art was harnessed as an ideological means of promoting the radical changes sweeping through society, effectively serving as a visual testament to the ideals and aspirations of the nation's transformation (Groys, 1992).<sup>13</sup>

In the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), curator Alfred H. Barr (1936) introduced an interpretive approach that left an indelible mark on modern art museums in general. It viewed art primarily in terms of its aesthetic properties, stressing patterns, chronology, and the spread of a specific artistic style, largely independent of the social conditions in which the art was conceived (Kantor, 2001: 26). Artists, it was argued, were deliberately moving away from the reproduction of natural phenomena, ushering in an era of

<sup>11</sup> Museums dedicated to the works of living artists were later to open in Munich (Neue Pinakothek, 1846), London (National Gallery of British Art, 1857) and Moscow (Tretyakov Gallery, 1874).

<sup>12</sup> In 1896, a significant number of important Impressionist works entered the Museum of Living Artists, and a few years later Berlin's National Gallery began to acquire progressive French and German art (Altshuler, 2006: 3-4).

<sup>13</sup> Artists themselves were responsible for the state acquisition of progressive, avant-garde art and its distribution to public museums throughout the Soviet Union in the 1918-20 period (Zhilyaev, 2015: 304-12, 616, 623-4). The 1920s and 1930s saw a proliferation of modern art museums in Germany, Poland, the United States, Italy, the Netherlands and elsewhere (Lorente, 2011).

abstract art that emphasised the purity of aesthetic engagement (Barr, 1936: 11). In this perspective, art was seen as a self-contained realm—a space in which the creative process unfolded independently of external pressures such as social, political, or personal forces (Shapiro, 2013: 14). The physical manifestation of this vision extended into the gallery space of MoMA itself. Neutral-toned walls, hanging just below eye level and ample spaces between works cultivated an environment where each piece could be encountered on its own merits and so reinforced the ideal of aesthetic autonomy (Altshuler, 2005).

The consolidation of the museum's interpretive power over the art of living artists, combined with the growing importance of the art market, sparked a heightened awareness among artists of the social and material conditions of the art they were making. Fraser (2005) argues that by the late 1960s this manifested itself in critiques of the circulation and exchange of artworks as commodities serving interests contrary to those of the artists. At issue was the fact that “the autonomy of art objects—as discrete and separable from both artist and viewer, from both the site of production and the site of presentation or consumption—determines their ‘materiality’ not only in their physical ‘presence’ but also as commodities” (Fraser, 2005: 56). Recognising that even the most aesthetically autonomous artworks are used, and that their commodity form conditions that use, initiatives such as the Art Workers Coalition advocated policies to control such use (Fraser, 2005: 60). Artists sought to maintain their autonomy through “the conscious and critical determination, in each particular and immediate instance, of the *uses* to which artistic activity is put and the interests it *serves*” (Fraser, 2005: 78).

One set of strategies of resistance that has emerged in response to the pervasive influences of institutions and market forces has been directed at the art itself. It has manifested itself in “the dematerialisation of the art object in language and action and the temporalisation of artworks in specific times and spaces” (Fraser, 2005: 57). This attitude has been expressed in a variety of ways, each contributing to a reimagining of art's purpose and significance. One vehicle for subversion was the deliberate exodus of artistic production from the confines of the artist's studio. By moving the creative process beyond the walls of the studio, artists sought to free their work from established contexts and to imbue it

with new layers of meaning that were drawn from the wider social landscape (Hoffmann, 2012). Another facet of this defiance was the elevation of the concept above the material object. This marked a departure from the conventional emphasis on the tangible artefact, and instead prioritised the intellectual and ideological underpinnings that animated the artwork (Lippard, 1973). In addition, many artists embraced the use of ephemeral materials, emerging technologies, and the human body in temporary installations and performances. These transient mediums represented a departure from the permanence and passive engagement traditionally associated with visual art.

At the same time, the public sphere, as championed by Habermas (1989), which claimed to represent the general will, was seen to function as a powerful mechanism of exclusion, and was deemed no less violent and less democratic than the universalising tendency of the liberal capitalist market that it claimed to displace. Along with these critiques came appeals for museums to adopt a more inclusive mandate, one that would make art relevant to more diverse communities (AWC, 1969a). These calls found expression in the creation of cooperatives, project spaces, media centres, bookshops, video distribution networks and community television stations, often led by artists themselves (Rosati & Staniszewski, 2012; Goddard, 2018; Petrešin-Bachelez, 2019). Moving away from the traditional role of serving only the established ‘community’ of art insiders, many artists redirected their efforts towards serving communities comprised of other fellow artists, women, marginalised groups and local residents (Fraser, 2005: 75). They sought to resist the pervasive forces of commodification by employing immaterial and site-specific interventions that were designed to operate predominantly or exclusively within the realm of specific publics. This deliberate strategy sought to counter the increasingly transactional nature of art, emphasising instead the intrinsic value of engagement, interaction, and collective experience. As such, the alternative public sphere sought to resist the abstract principles of generality that dominated the ‘liberal bourgeois’ public sphere (Enzensberger, 1970; Negt & Kluge, 1972).

## Preserving the ephemeral art object

A good example of the shifting concept of art's autonomy in terms of dematerialisation, temporalisation and self-organisation is the medium of video (London, 2021). Although it was still “discrete and separable from both artist and viewer,” video offered an inherently reproducible commodity that defied the traditional scarcity associated with the museum-guarded original. The growing accessibility of technology for recording and playback of the moving image made video an alternative exhibition space for artists. Video offered an autonomous space that bypassed the traditional conduits of the museum and the general public sphere of the mass media. It fused elements of personal expression with the act of mediation, encapsulating both portability and reproducibility within its framework. Video served as a relational medium, fostering a differently mediated connection between the artist's creation and the viewer's experience. This amalgamation promised to provide a more egalitarian platform for both exhibition and dissemination, effectively transcending its role as a purely aesthetic medium to encompass a broader social dimension (Spampinato, 2021: 53 ff). The ephemeral nature of video, however, underlined the impermanence inherent in these creations. In response to the potential loss of these works, independent organisations have had to enter the domain of museums and archives: preservation, explored in this section.

In New York, the Howard Wise Gallery was transformed into a non-profit centre for video production and support, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI). This move was made in response to a number of catalysts, notably an episode in which MoMA's disregard for the intentions of Takis, an artist represented by the Wise Gallery, led to a protracted confrontation between artists and the museum (AWC, 1969b: 46).<sup>14</sup> It was also influenced by the recognition that artists were faced with systemic barriers that made it difficult for them to access broadcast television (Wise, 1973: 4). The EAI was set up as an umbrella organisation for artists and was

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<sup>14</sup> Artists associated with the Howard Wise Gallery, such as Takis, Hans Haacke and Wen-Ying Tsai, played a significant role in the protests against MoMA in 1969-1970 (Bryan-Wilson, 2009). EAI was founded in 1971 (<https://www.eai.org/webpages/1002>, accessed 16 October 2023).

designed to assist them in the use of portable television and videotape as ‘alternate media’ platforms for connecting with audiences (Wise, 1973). Its founding mission was to “explore the potentials of the electronic media as a means of expression and non-commercial communication.”<sup>15</sup> This alternative distribution system soon encompassed a network of centres internationally, which also became important video workshops for artists and community groups.<sup>16</sup>

In Amsterdam, artists also saw television as an inherent arena for artistic presentation. However, only a fraction of the work produced found its way to the airwaves. The city had a robust international scene that included artists such as Ulises Carrión, Raul Marroquin, Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas, Marina Abramović and Lisa Stansfield. Disillusioned by the unfulfilled potential of television for a democratic approach to culture, the cinematographer and director René Coelho opened a gallery and production centre dedicated to video, MonteVideo (van Hal, 1999). This initiative was not an isolated venture, but was in line with a wider trend of artist-run centres supporting video.<sup>17</sup> These forged a community of practice around the moving image, culminating in a collaborative ecosystem where experimentation, critique, and exploration converged (Huisman & van Mechelen, 2019).

From the outset, however, the technology that underpinned this alternative art paradigm was itself subject to market dynamics. The foundation of the system rested on magnetic tape, a fragile material characterised by its short lifespan. The industrial policy of planned obsolescence translated into questions about video’s inherent instability and impermanence. To make matters worse, whether materialised as tape

15 <https://www.eai.org/supporting-documents/195/w.1210.0>, accessed 16 October 2023.

16 Electronic Arts Intermix began distribution services in 1973 and currently has a catalogue of 3,500 titles. Examples of other centres include the Experimental Television Center, founded in 1971 in Owego, NY; Art Metropole, founded in 1974 in Toronto by the artist group General Idea; and Video Data Bank, founded in 1976 in Chicago.

17 In the Netherlands alone, there were several venues dedicated to the presentation of video art in the 1970s. In addition to MonteVideo, there was the Lijnbaancentrum (Rotterdam, 1970s-1980s), Agora (Maastricht, 1972-1985), Meatball (The Hague, 1972-1992), Open Studio (Amsterdam, 1972-1985), In-Out Center (Amsterdam, 1972-1974) and Het Kijkhuis (The Hague, est. 1975).

or encoded as an electronic signal, video is a screenless storage medium that requires a playback device. The unregulated landscape of the technology industry, characterised by competition and innovation, bore witness to what would be termed ‘format wars’ (Hughes, 2019: 127 ff). The clash of mutually incompatible formats and rival standards exacerbated the complexity of the video ecosystem.

Preserving video entailed a set of intricate skills that few had access to: the delicate process of heat treatment and magnetic media cleaning, the repair and maintenance of obsolete video players, the complex endeavor of migrating content between disparate video formats, as well as digitisation and subsequent preservation onto digital storage media. This process went beyond the purely technical. It ventured into the complex terrain of aesthetic considerations that arose when confronting the imperative of preserving the authenticity of these works. Central to this was the question of agency—who holds the authority to decide whether specific sequences within a video should be edited or expunged, whether alterations to colour or contrast are permissible, and whether defects arising from aging materials or technical limitations at the time of production should be retained or rectified (Wijers, et al., 2003: 25-35)? These dilemmas traversed the nexus of artistic intent, curatorial stewardship and the inherent evolution of technology. The preservation process therefore involved not only the safeguarding of tangible media, but also the nuanced decisions that could potentially reshape the narrative, aesthetic and historical significance of an artwork.

EAI was one of a number of initiatives that have taken up the challenge of video preservation since the mid-1980s. The projects were often spearheaded by artists themselves.<sup>18</sup> This work was inextricably entwined with the broader framework of distribution. In the words of EAI’s then director Lori Zippay, “distribution’s a form of preservation, and so access and stewardship of the collection go hand-in-hand. We never do preservation at EAI to put it on a shelf and let it sit and get dusty. We preserve works so that they can be distributed and circulated” (2021). This

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<sup>18</sup> Early video preservationists included Bob Harris at Anthology Film Archives, Tony Conrad at Media Study/Buffalo, Ralph Hocking at the Experimental Television Center, videomaker David Schulman at EAI; Conrad published a series of articles on videotape restoration (Hocking & Jimenez, 2000).

philosophy underscores an approach that elevates preservation beyond a mere archival endeavour. In this context, preservation becomes a dynamic process that is inextricably linked to accessing and engaging with the work.

In the early 1990s, when the sustainability of art collections was a strategic cultural priority in the Netherlands, MonteVideo was entrusted with safeguarding the video holdings of ten museums and institutions.<sup>19</sup> This has set in motion a trajectory of preservation that has continued through various projects over the decades, including the transfer from analogue to digital formats and ultimately making the works available on an online platform.<sup>20</sup> MonteVideo's role in preserving diverse institutional holdings underscores the imperative of transcending the boundaries of individual entities and pooling resources to engage in a collective pursuit of conservation.<sup>21</sup> It also highlights the need to adapt methodologies to ensure the transition of artworks across changing formats and platforms.

A major video preservation initiative took shape through the collaboration of 235 Media and the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany. The 235 Media has its origins in a shop and distributor of cassettes and fanzines of the music underground, set up by the artists Axel Wirths and Ulrich Leistner in Cologne in the early 1980s.<sup>22</sup> It ran a video gallery and organised events and performances in its premises, and acted as a distributor of a growing video catalogue (Buschmann & Nitsche, 2020).<sup>23</sup>

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19 These included De Appel, MonteVideo, Time Based Arts, Lijnbaancentrum, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, Rijksakademie, Van Abbemuseum, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Groninger Museum, World Wide Video Center. In the next phase, the collections of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Kröller-Müller Museum and the ICN were also preserved.

20 In 2018, LIMA launched a web platform, Mediakunst.net, which provides access to the videos for research purposes (<http://mediakunst.net>, accessed 16 October 2023).

21 See the case study in Chapter 4.

22 Among other early independent centres presenting video in Germany were Gerry Schum's Fernsehund Videogalerie in Düsseldorf (1969-1973), Ingrid Oppenheim's Video-Studio-Galerie in Cologne (1973-1979) and Mike Steiner's Studiogalerie in Berlin (1974-1980).

23 The agency later transferred its own video collection and distribution to the newly established imai - inter media art institute. It continues to be active in the preservation of media art at the national level (Buschmann & Caianiello, 2013; Buschmann & Šimunović, 2014).

As part of the project with the museum in Aachen in the early 2000s, a strategy for the conservation of videotapes was developed with the help of specialist video technicians and a graduate restorer. The strategy is also applicable to other collections and has provided the basis for the ongoing restoration of video art works.<sup>24</sup> These efforts laid the foundation for the museum's online platform, a virtual repository that places the video collection in historical and artistic context.<sup>25</sup>

## Maintaining stakeholder agency

The previous section has shown that preserving ephemeral art involves dynamic processes tied to access and engagement. There is a need for collaboration, the pooling of resources, and the flexibility to adapt methods for transferring artworks across formats. To this end, digital platforms have come to play a role in reconciling access with the preservation of artworks' contexts. However, this broadening of conservation practice also requires recognition of the roles of different actors in the shaping of the art object. This section examines the ways in which alliance-building within the conservation community has responded to the need to sustain the agency of stakeholders. In particular, this discussion highlights the central role of interdisciplinary, case-based approaches as a means of developing overarching models and strategies.

In 1996, the video centre Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) and the Media Alliance, representing New York's video resources, jointly initiated a landmark project on video conservation.<sup>26</sup> What set it apart was its explicit emphasis on longer-term, interdisciplinary research involving a broader spectrum of organisations, including nonprofits alongside major museums.<sup>27</sup> Collaborative working groups were formed, comprising an

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<sup>24</sup> <https://videoarchiv-ludwigforum.de/about-the-project/>,  
<https://235media.de/2004/07/video-et-cogito/>, both accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> <https://videoarchiv-ludwigforum.de>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Other US museums addressed the sustainability of video before: Open Circuits at MoMA (1974), Media Arts in Transition at the Walker Art Center (1983), the Symposium on Video Preservation at MoMA (1991).

<sup>27</sup> Other nonprofits represented included EAI, ETC, MonteVideo, V Tape. The participating museums included MoMA, the Whitney, the Walker, the Long Beach

eclectic mix of stakeholders, ranging from video artists to curators, preservationists, television engineers, archivists and librarians. Over the course of eight months, they explored various facets of video preservation. This inclusive methodology was emblematic of the recognition that preservation is a multidimensional endeavour that requires the fusion of insights from disparate domains. The research culminated in the *Playback '96* symposium, held in San Francisco under the auspices of SFMOMA, where each of the groups presented their findings in the form of white papers and panel presentations. The project took place at a time when the advent of digital media was directly influencing technical and aesthetic discussions about the materiality of storage media and migration (BAVC, 1998). There was a consensus among participants that the preservation of video works needs to take into account the artistic intent and document the process appropriately, both on the part of conservators and curators.

Another example of long-term collaborative research is the *TechArchaeology: A Symposium on Installation Art Preservation* (2000), which involved 25 curators, conservators, and artists. Like *Playback '96*, the project consisted of working groups, but instead of focusing on thematic areas, they conducted case studies of works from the exhibition *Seeing Time*, on view at SFMOMA (Jimenez & Messier, 2001). An important premise was that “all of those involved in the creation, interpretation, and care of these objects — at a minimum, conservators, curators, artists, and technical experts — need to address preservation issues together” (Jimenez & Messier, 2001: 177-8). The working group discussions concerned primarily the challenges of preserving the artist’s intent in the works containing obsolete and degrading media. This prompted participants to consider the future presentation and interpretation challenges for each work, identify potential weaknesses, and formulate possible strategies for long-term preservation. The outcomes of the conversations were then discussed in theoretical and technical contexts at the symposium.<sup>28</sup>

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Museum of Art, MOCA Los Angeles, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Getty Museum, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Centre Pompidou.

28 Following the symposium, the AIC organised a forum in New York City two years later, after which the Guggenheim Museum launched the TechFocus series, dedicated to

The Variable Media Network is a well-known initiative in the field of contemporary art conservation. The consortium was founded in 2001 by the Guggenheim Museum together with the Daniel Langlois Foundation of Canada.<sup>29</sup> For the Guggenheim, whose participation was led by associate curator of media arts Jon Ippolito, the goal was to develop a strategy for the care of concept art, minimalism, and video. Art historian and documentary filmmaker Alain Depocas led the project on behalf of the Daniel Langlois Foundation, which has long been dedicated to the preservation and archiving of materials related to the history of art and technology.<sup>30</sup> Like *TechArchaeology*, the consortium chose the path of case studies, carried out by experts from different institutions and disciplines. The works were selected to cover as wide a range of issues as possible and to provide a sufficient basis for the creation of general recommendations and models for the preservation of media art. The outcome was ultimately a unified strategy, the ‘Variable Media Approach,’ based on the idea of media-independent preservation (Depocas, et al., 2003; Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014). This consists of transferring obsolete formats to contemporary technologies, remediation. A work in a new form is considered authentic if its ‘behaviour,’ collectively determined by the artist’s intent, the object, and the viewer’s experience, is preserved. Although the authors also created an auxiliary Variable Media Questionnaire to document the ‘behaviours’ of artworks, this approach has found only limited application.<sup>31</sup> The impact of the project lies on the theoretical level of defining the spectrum of possible strategies: storage,

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video art (2010), film and slide projection art (2012), software-based art (2015) and 3D fabrication in art (2021).

29 Research collaborators included the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives, Franklin Furnace Archive, Performance Art Festival+Archives (Cleveland), Rhizome.org, and the Walker Art Center (<https://variablemedia.net>, accessed 16 October 2023). The project continued under different names (Archiving the Avant Garde, Forging the Future) until 2009. Coordination was taken over in 2004 by digital artist Richard Rinehart, then working at the Berkeley Art Museum Library (<https://www.si.edu/tbma/interview/interview-richard-rinehart>, accessed 16 October 2023).

30 The foundation was founded in the late 1990s by Canadian animator Daniel Langlois after his 3D animation software became the industry standard and was acquired by Microsoft.

emulation, migration and reinterpretation.<sup>32</sup> The Langlois Foundation has continued its own research on media-independent preservation and has conducted further case studies in collaboration with Canadian museums. It has produced a guide to the cataloguing, documentation and conservation of media art, called DOCAM, which extends the strategies to include reconstruction.<sup>33</sup>

A few years later, the largest European research project on the conservation of installations to date, Inside Installations, was initiated. It was a collaboration between a range of museums and institutes associated with the INCCA network. The organisations examined and documented over thirty complex installations from their holdings. In addition to the book, they developed a web-based platform with detailed documentation of the case studies (Scholte & Wharton, 2011).<sup>34</sup> In this context, it was a step towards demystifying the care of contemporary art, the communication of which to the public is often complicated by the commitment to secrecy laid down in the Code of Ethics for Museums, especially with regards to practical information about specific works (ICOM, 2017: 42),<sup>35</sup> but also by the concern that conservators' interventions will be perceived as recommendations for other works for which they cannot be held responsible. The situation is not helped by the complex questions of legal authorship presented by works of contemporary art (Miller, 2021a).

A major museum initiative for the preservation of media art in an international context was Matters in Media Art. This was a long-term collaboration between MoMA, SFMOMA and the Tate, supported by electronic art collectors Pamela and Dick Kramlich.<sup>36</sup> Compared to the

31 The questionnaire was first published in 2008 in the form of a web application, available at <https://variablemediaquestionnaire.net/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

32 For example, LIMA has realised the Unfold project dedicated to reinterpretation as the most radical of these strategies, <http://li-ma.nl/site/article/unfold-mediation-reinterpretation>, accessed 16 October 2023.

33 Published in 2010 at <https://docam.ca>, accessed 16 October 2023.

34 <https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl>, accessed 16 October 2023.

35 The commitment has been taken up in various variations by national associations.

36 The Kramlichs were already associated with the *TechArchaeology* symposium, whose case studies were conducted on works from their collection that were installed at SFMOMA at the time.

Variable Media Initiative, with which it ran in parallel, it was more pragmatically oriented, focusing on building institutional infrastructure. It helped three museums set up laboratories for the conservation of time-based media art.<sup>37</sup> The project was oriented towards developing a practical guide for the acquisition, documentation, loan and digital archiving of media art.<sup>38</sup> While the Variable Media Approach has more of a pioneering value today (Dekker, 2018: 51-3), and the DOCAM guide has not transcended the Canadian context, Matters in Media Art is regarded as the museum standard in the field.

## **Preserving the materiality of ephemeral art**

This examination highlights the recognition that the preservation of ephemeral art transcends a singular approach. It necessitates a cohesive collaboration across a spectrum of stakeholders who contribute to the formation and continuation of the art object's narrative. This is also relevant to the material support and components associated with technology-based artworks. Early video art is closely tied to active instruments that shape the identity and aesthetics of artworks. However, despite their importance, the preservation of these tangible components faces obstacles. The preservation of tools is also vital for digital art due to software obsolescence. Here, a variety of approaches have been developed, including emulation, virtualisation and migration.

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37 The labs were developed by the three project coordinators from their positions as conservators at their respective museums. Pip Laurenson joined Tate in 1996 as a conservator of sculpture; in 2004 she set up the Time-Based Media department, which now has several permanent posts (<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/conservation/time-based-media>, accessed 16 October 2023). Glenn Wharton became MoMA's full-time media conservator in 2007; the museum now also has several permanent positions ([https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/category/media-conservation/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/category/media-conservation/), accessed 16 October 2023). SFMOMA created its first permanent position for Martina Haidvogl in 2011 (<https://www.sfmoma.org/read/team-media-action-contemplation/>, accessed 16 October 2023). In comparison, the Guggenheim created its first permanent position for Joanna Philips in 2008 (<https://www.guggenheim.org/conservation/time-based-media>, accessed 16 October 2023).

38 The final version of the manual has been available on <http://mattersinmediaart.org> since 2015, accessed 16 October 2023.

The *Playback* project discussed also drew attention to a critical aspect of preservation—the physicality of installations and the intricate apparatuses that are integral to the creation of artworks involving moving images. Coinciding with Steina and Woody Vasulka's retrospective at SFMOMA, the artists discussed at the symposium the fact that early works of video art are often intimately tied to instruments. Far from being passive tools, these instruments wielded active agency that shaped the nature and aesthetics of the artworks. However, the preservation of these tangible components has faced major obstacles despite the fact that they carry a significance comparable to that of the recorded content. The Vasulkas had previously curated a large-scale exhibition of early video apparatuses at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz (1992), but due to a lack of interest, these historically significant devices were returned to their original owners after the exhibition. According to the artists, institutions often prioritise the 'evidence' of the artistic process, the tapes and recordings:

We realized that our language - a very ambiguous term, is located very much in the instrument [in a similar way that] photography and film was sort of located in its photographic or camera obscura principle, and the organizing principle was the pinhole. [T]here is nothing ephemeral. But [o]nly the tape, or the record, the evidence which we produced as a visual structure, or as audio structure, became this perishable librarian subject [which] we all got here for. The rest is a vast array of machinery that produced these things.  
(Woody Vasulka at the *Playback* symposium, 1996)<sup>39</sup>

It was in recognition of similar concerns that the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe set up a media preservation laboratory, the Labor für antiquierte Videosysteme.<sup>40</sup> It was founded by Christoph Blase, who came to the field of preservation through a private archive. He had been working as an art critic and professor of art history for over twenty years

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39 <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/byorg/bavc/pb96/transc/pt1b.html>, accessed 16 October 2023. I return to *Playback* in Chapter 2.

40 <https://zkm.de/en/laboratory-for-antiquated-video-systems>, accessed 16 October 2023.

when his father gave him a large archive of video documentation of the *documenta 5* exhibition (1972), for which he was responsible (PACKED, 2010). Unable to find a company to digitise the tapes, Blase began looking for the necessary equipment himself. After the success of the digitisation, he set about expanding his machine fleet. When the ZKM decided to support the project financially, he eventually moved it into the museum in 2004.<sup>41</sup> Today, the laboratory is a leading centre for the preservation of video art in Germany. It can be described as a living museum of video technology, whose equipment has gradually grown to over 300 pieces of apparatus capable of digitising almost 50 video formats. Several major projects for museums have been carried out there.<sup>42</sup>

The importance of preserving tools and frameworks is also crucial in the case of digital art where a central issue is the obsolescence of the software on which the work is based.<sup>43</sup> Rapidly evolving operating systems are not only incompatible with each other, but also with their own versions, meaning that software in its original version will only work on, for example, Windows 95, which has been out of distribution for twenty years. Software may also be dependent on specific applications, protocols and interfaces, such as Javascript or Flash. Typical preservation strategies for making obsolete software functional are virtualisation, emulation and migration. Emulation is typically understood as the use of software to provide the hardware requirements of a work or its component, such as the emulation of an 8-bit ZX Spectrum computer accessible through the

41 A similar lab, Preservation & Art - Media Archaeology Lab (PAMAL), was established in 2014 in Avignon, France. Media archaeology labs that are more oriented towards humanities research and production are run at Humboldt University Berlin (Medienarchäologischer Fundus, since 2003), Hainburg, Austria (IMA Institut für Medienarchäologie, since 2005), and the University of Colorado at Boulder (Media Archaeology Lab, since 2009), among others.

42 As part of 40 Years of Video Art, 14 works from five museum collections were digitised between 2004 and 2006 (<http://www.40jahrevideokunst.de>, accessed 16 October 2023), followed by Record > Again (50 works from four collections, 2006-2010, <http://www.record-again.de>, accessed 16 October 2023) and the video archive of the Forum Ludwig in Aachen (almost 200 works, 2012-2018, <http://www.videoarchiv-ludwigforum.de>, accessed 16 October 2023).

43 For this reason, the term ‘software-based art’ is sometimes preferred to digital art in conservation.

modern Linux operating system. Virtualisation is similar to emulation, but rather than mimicking the historical hardware, it operates it, with access provided by specialised software. In both cases, the hardware devices can be accessed from any computer capable of running emulation or virtualisation software.<sup>44</sup>

In art conservation, these approaches have been developing since the late 1990s. In recent years, ‘emulation as a service’ has expanded the possibilities for accessing emulated art via the internet. For example, the bwFLA initiative at the University of Freiburg, has created a working prototype that emulates an instance of the obsolete Hypercard system. The application was originally developed in the early 1990s based on a design by Vilém Flusser for an electronic editing and publishing system.<sup>45</sup> Another strategy is migration. This involves redesigning a work or a component of a work using current technology, for example reprogramming a software application in another language.<sup>46</sup>

Key to an initiative of this scale has been the availability of emulation and archiving services, developed by Rhizome over the past decade. Webrecorder allows archiving a website with various dependencies on external services, such as videos embedded from YouTube or conversations from Twitter, as well as on obsolete technologies such as Flash or Java.<sup>47</sup> Oldweb.today, on the other hand, allows viewing the website in historical browsers, as well as to assemble its archive from various partially archived versions.<sup>48</sup> Both systems are freely available.<sup>49</sup> In addition to these, LIMA has developed a service for the preservation of web-based works, ArtHost, in collaboration with artists Peter Gonda and Constant Dullaart.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ensom (2019) introduces the strategies with examples of works from the Tate Modern collection.

<sup>45</sup> <http://eaas.uni-freiburg.de/demo-flusser.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>46</sup> On the current debate on migration strategy, see e.g. Engel & Phillips, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> <https://webrecorder.net>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>48</sup> <http://oldweb.today/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>49</sup> <https://github.com/webrecorder>, <https://github.com/oldweb-today>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>50</sup> <https://arthost.nl>, accessed 16 October 2023.

Museums became more involved with digital art following the advent of Internet art in the mid-1990s, when they began commissioning works and setting up web galleries. These rarely lasted more than a few years, but many online galleries have recently been revived.<sup>51</sup> The following decade saw an increase in the acquisition of interactive installations, software-generated moving images and video games.<sup>52</sup> Then, in the course of the 2010s, a gradual consolidation of conservation approaches can be observed.<sup>53</sup>

## Towards the conservation of contemporary art

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51 The Tate has revived its collection of intermedia art and launched research into the preservation of networked art (<http://www2.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/>, <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/reshaping-the-collectible>, accessed 16 October 2023.). The Whitney Museum has revived its Artport online gallery (<https://whitney.org/artport>, accessed 16 October 2023.). The Guggenheim reconstructed three networked works created for the museum at the turn of the millennium (<http://web.archive.org/web/20140911075148/http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/press-room/releases/press-release-archive/2002/668-february-18-internet-art-commissions>, [https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artwork\\_type/internet-art](https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artwork_type/internet-art), both accessed 16 October 2023). The Walker Art Center's Gallery9 is still open (<http://gallery9.walkerart.org/>, accessed 16 October 2023). SFMOMA operated E.space ([http://web.archive.org/web/20080215025649/http://www.sfmoma.org/espace/espace\\_overview.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20080215025649/http://www.sfmoma.org/espace/espace_overview.html), accessed 16 October 2023). Commissioned network works have also been created for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

52 The first software work in the Tate's collection was the computer-generated animation *Becoming* (2003) by Michael Craig Martin. MoMA currently has over 70 software works in its collection ([https://www.moma.org/collection/works?classifications=39&include\\_uncataloged\\_works=1](https://www.moma.org/collection/works?classifications=39&include_uncataloged_works=1), accessed 16 October 2023).

53 The ZKM coordinated research in this area with other collections in 2010-2012 (<http://www.digitalartconservation.org>, accessed 16 October 2023). The Guggenheim, in collaboration with the Computer Science Institute at New York University, conducted the Conserving Computer-Based Art project in 2013-2019 (<https://www.guggenheim.org/conservation/the-conserving-computer-based-art-initiative>, accessed 16 October 2023). LIMA, in collaboration with SBMK, has been exploring the preservation, presentation and distribution of software-based art since 2014 with the annual Transforming Digital Art symposium.

Institutional approaches also evolve and adapt to needs and visions. From the point of view of museums in general, it is advantageous to develop closer collaborations with organisations that have a long history of working with a particular artistic genre. SFMOMA's collaboration with the Bay Area Video Coalition, a local community video centre, has been crucial to the museum's media literacy and, in the person of Mark Heller, continues to this day after nearly three decades. In the Dutch context, LIMA continues the legacy of its predecessors MonteVideo and NIMk. Among other activities, it now acts as a kind of external media preservation outpost for a number of museums across the country, thanks in part to their mobilisation in the joint SBMK initiative.<sup>54</sup> The Imai Foundation and its predecessor 235 Media are also a natural partner for German museums. In the case of Christoph Blasé and the ZKM, there has been a joining of forces and the creation of a laboratory in a museum that would otherwise have had to build one on its own. Museums began to recognise artists and organisations as a community of practice relevant to its conservation mission and its members as partners in collection care. They became more open to establishing longer-term collaborations with practitioners, to strengthening and coordinating interdepartmental collaboration, or to creating a dedicated conservator position.

New art is also a catalyst and a reason for closer collaboration between different departments in a museum. The aforementioned SFMOMA has set up a working group called 'Team Media', which meets once a month and is open to anyone involved with media works, including conservators, curators, registrars, technicians and the head of the collection. The latter is now at the centre of the expansion, exhibition and conservation of the museum's holdings of electronic art and design.<sup>55</sup> The acquisition of the works of the influential New Tendencies movement by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, coordinated by the head of conservation, Mirta Pavić, also resulted in the strengthening of cooperation between the institution's departments. At present, the creation of a dedicated position for a media conservator and the consolidation of this activity in a dedicated laboratory seems to be possible only in large museums. The Tate, MoMA and SFMOMA have

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<sup>54</sup> See Chapter 3 for more on SBMK.

<sup>55</sup> Discussed in Chapter 2.

received impetus for this from private collectors in Matters in Media Art; for the Guggenheim and Rhizome, support from the private sector and foundations has also been crucial.<sup>56</sup> In the long term, however, it can be expected to become a pressing issue for contemporary art collections in general.<sup>57</sup>

Conservation and restoration is often associated with the professional repair of old art. It is one of the less visible professions in the visual arts (Miller, 2021b; Finn, 2021), but one that is also closely intertwined with exhibition activity and whose framework largely determines what art is collectible. In short, conservation can be described as the effort to preserve an art object. Painting and sculpture are made up of different materials that react to their environment, and conservation seeks to prevent their degradation in the first place, whether by ensuring climatic conditions, luminosity or by limiting access to pollutants and pests.<sup>58</sup> The possible deterioration of an object, which may also be due to other causes such as poor quality materials, natural ageing of the material or physical damage during transport, then requires its professional analysis and the determination of the interventions necessary to restore it to its original state, i.e. restoration (ICOM-CC, 1984: sec. 2).<sup>59</sup> In the analysis and decision-making process, the restorer is required to be impartial and objective, as well as being able to reverse the intervention itself if necessary. The result of a successful intervention is therefore the restoration of the physical and historical integrity of the object. If there

56 The ZKM Karlsruhe, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, MMK Frankfurt, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian American Art Museum, M+ Museum Hong Kong and Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney also have dedicated positions for media conservation.

57 Institutional models are analysed in Laurenson (2013), discussed in Chapter 2. For more on the field of the conservation of time-based media art, see Engel & Phillips (2022).

58 This is understood to be indirect, so-called preventive conservation.

59 The terms conservation and restoration are used interchangeably in some contexts. ICOM originally joined the terms with a hyphen as a compromise, but now understands restoration to be one of the conservation measures applied directly to an object to halt damaging processes or strengthen its structure (<http://www.icom-cc.org/242/>, accessed 16 October 2023). In this sense, the aim of restoration to restore an object is part of the effort to preserve it—conservation.

are changes that cannot be reversed, it is considered to be damaged. In this way, art conservation is understood as the preservation of the integrity of the object in relation to its original state, in other words, the elimination of change.<sup>60</sup> This is true if the work of art is understood as a unique and integral object.

But what if we need to preserve a work that virtually disappears after its presentation? An oft-repeated thesis is that installations only exist when they are installed.<sup>61</sup> This tautology signals nothing less than a broader reassessment of the mission of collecting institutions. Museums such as the Tate, MoMA and Guggenheim are using it to illustrate the complexities of caring for works that depart from the centrality of the material, unique object. This includes not just video installations, but also conceptual art, sound objects, digital art, and performance art. Not only do these works change from exhibition to exhibition, but they virtually disappear when they are deinstalled and then have to be reproduced anew. Monitors, projectors, videotapes or software are in most cases ancillary technology that can be replaced without losing the value of the work.

However, technical functionality is not the only criterion for variation. Equally important are questions of aesthetic integrity, which cannot be answered without an understanding of the artistic intention behind the work. Questions of the exhibition environment also come into play: spatial layout, lighting, sound levels, conditions for audience interaction, etc. This means that the acquisition of these works depends on the ability to reproduce them in the future, under different conditions and in a different environment, even without the presence of the original creators. They require consultation with the creators, which must be recorded along with the documentation of the installation process. The preservation of non-object-based art, rather than the preservation of the

60 A historically anchored overview of the main theses of traditional art conservation is offered, for example, in the first chapter of van Saaze, 2013.

61 See, for example, the websites of the media conservation labs at Tate and MoMA:  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20120418000751/http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/>  
 conservation/time-based-media and  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20180628081649/https://www.moma.org/collection/about/>  
 conservation/matters-in-media-art, both accessed 16 October 2023.

original state, therefore requires the acceptance of change and the creation of conditions for deciding on its permissible forms.

Laurenson (2006) articulates the principles of conservation of temporary installations. She argues that for these works, the goal of traditional conservation—to return the object to its original state—is inadequate. An installation tends to change over the course of exhibitions, and if we wanted to restore it to the form in which it was originally presented, this might be technically impossible, and would also go against the intention of the creator who gradually changed the work. Given the impermanence and ephemerality of media installations, it is necessary to move beyond the material perspective typical of the restoration of painting and sculpture. To this end, Laurenson introduced the concept of allography into the conservation discourse. She borrowed it from Nelson Goodman (1976), who considers musical and theatrical works to be allographic, i.e. consisting of a score and a performance. By analogy, a time-based media artwork consists of (conceptual) identity and (spatio-temporal) iteration.<sup>62</sup> In this it differs from traditional painting and sculpture, which can be described as autographic.<sup>63</sup> When a media work is reinstalled, some of its components remain, while others can be altered, depending on which properties are essential to its identity. Similarly to musical works, art objects often require interpretation, which constitutes the second stage of their creation. One of the tasks of conservation is therefore to document the artist's intent (ideally already at the time of acquisition) and, on that basis, to determine the essential properties of

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62 Laurenson (2001) says the term is useful to “describe installations that have a duration and therefore have to be experienced in the context of the passing of a period of time.” Laurenson (2005) defines time-based media installations as “works of art that incorporate audio, film, video, 35 mm slides or computer-based elements.” The Electronic Media Group of the American Institute of Conservation (EMG AIC) defines time-based media art as “any artwork that has both physical and temporal dimensions” ([http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Electronic\\_Media](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Electronic_Media), accessed 16 October 2023). The time-based media art conservation departments of museums are generally also responsible for software-based and performance art.

63 Goodman (1976) originally made a distinction between autographic and allographic works in their falsifiability. He saw forgeries as more symptomatic of the fine art market than of the performing arts.

the work.<sup>64</sup> The range of these properties may be very broad for some works, while other artists take a more lax approach, leaving much of the decision-making to the exhibition staff. Laurenson (2006), in terms borrowed from music theory, speaks of 'thickly' and 'thinly' specified works. Kemp (2023) further extends the relevance of the concept of allography to conservation through its etymological meaning, where autographic means to be signed by one's own hand and allographic means to be signed by another's hand. The implication is that "all cultural heritage is necessarily allographic once it is cared for by others." This means that practices developed in the context of contemporary art conservation are applicable to a much wider domain.

Traditional conservation practices have historically centred on disciplines such as chemistry and, to some extent, physics and biology. In the field of contemporary art, conservation efforts now extend beyond the traditional scientific domains and intersect significantly with art history and theory. This intersection is crucial to understanding the context, intent and cultural significance of artworks, which in turn informs conservation decisions that are consistent with the work's concept and the artist's intent. Preserving contemporary art also requires an understanding of the history of media technologies that have shaped artistic expression over time. In addition, the fields of archival, library and information sciences have taken on a new importance. As artworks expand into the digital realm, preserving not only the physical but also the digital components requires expertise in managing and archiving information. This includes digital files, metadata and other materials that contribute to the preservation of an artwork. They must be accompanied by documentation and a system or infrastructure that brings these domains together. This diverse range of interdisciplinary overlaps highlights the need to appraise and coordinate the distributed agency of the artwork's stakeholders. Preserving modern artworks requires a

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<sup>64</sup> Laurenson (2006) works with the concept of 'work-defining properties'. Examples of these are: plans and specifications that define the parameters of possible alterations; acceptable display and playback equipment; acoustic properties; light levels; how the public comes into contact with the work; a previous installation that the maker has identified as a model, etc. For digital works, she later introduced the related concept of 'significant properties', borrowed from the field of digital preservation (Laurenson, 2014).

comprehensive understanding of not only the physical materials, but also the contextual, historical, and technological dimensions that contribute to the artwork.

To conclude, this chapter has shown that collaboration between independent organisations and museums is crucial to keeping contemporary art in the collective memory, where knowledge is passed on by a community of practice.<sup>65</sup> A practice that has emerged in response to the various challenges posed by the introduction of ephemeral formats such as video, installation, performance, digital media and the Internet into art and its reception. The motivations have varied. A number of initiatives were sparked by questions of access and distribution in relation to the media archives of galleries and art centres. The perspective of museums, on the other hand, is that of collections and exhibitions. In these terms, contemporary art has introduced concepts such as artist's intent, iteration, interpretation, identity and work-defining properties into the vocabulary.

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65 See also Noordegraaf, et al., 2013.

## Chapter 2

### **From collection management to content management in art documentation: the conservator as an editor<sup>66</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

During the West German federal elections of the autumn of 1969, Hans Haacke took his ‘systems’ practice into a new territory to make an explicitly political work. Staged at the annual exhibition *Prospect* at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, his installation entitled *Nachrichten* was intended as a vehicle to open up gallery walls to the outside world and its politics. Throughout the show, a teletype machine continually printed out messages transmitted by the German news agency DPA. The day after the transmission, the paper printouts were displayed on the walls for further reading and, eventually, on the third day, these rolls were labelled, dated, and stored in transparent tubular containers.

Haacke showed the same piece later that year in the United States, as part of his solo show at the Howard Wise Gallery. There, the machine was not connected to the DPA, but to the United Press International news service. In this installation, as in the previous one, the printed rolls of paper were displayed after the day of transmission and then stored. In 1970, *News* was shown at the famous *Software* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. Here, Haacke decided to use five teletype machines that simultaneously printed news reports from DPA, UPI, but also from the New York Times, the Italian service ANSA, and Reuters. Instead of being collected daily, the printouts accumulated on the floor, where they

<sup>66</sup> This chapter is based on Barok, D., Noordegraaf, J., & de Vries, A. P. (2019). From Collection Management to Content Management in Art Documentation: The Conservator as an Editor. *Studies in Conservation*, 64(8), 1–18. DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2019.1603921

morphed into sculptural forms. They were not hung or preserved beyond the duration of the exhibition.



Figure 3. Hans Haacke, *News*, 1969/2008. Newsfeed, paper, and printer.  
Installation view, SFMOMA, 2018. Photo: Dušan Barok.

Within one year, the work was shown on three occasions in varying forms depending on the decisions of the artist and staff involved, as if the conceptual framework was primary. In fact, almost four decades later, in 2008, when it was acquired by SFMOMA, it entered collection only as a set of instructions.<sup>67</sup> At its premiere staging in the museum, teletype is replaced by a dot-matrix printer connected to the Internet and churling out news stories from RSS feeds of various news agencies from around the world. The museum kept a sample of the printout for its artist material archive. The work was shown again at SFMOMA in 2018 (Figure 3). On this occasion, the museum recreated the software to make it possible for various adjustments including news sources for which the artist now selected eighteen various agencies.

<sup>67</sup> Martina Haidvogl, personal communication, 2018.

With respect to the media involved, the type of printer has changed across iterations, as well as the type of paper and the way agency news were received. This tells us that these components are replaceable, vehicular media (Laurenson, 2004, 2005, 2014), however their parameters are still significant to the final form of the work. They are not necessarily state-of-the-art technologies: in its latest iteration, the printer is a rather old model; and agency news are sourced through RSS feeds, rather than tweets for example. Rather than a unique, precious and self-contained object per se, Haacke's *News* is a changeable artwork.

Besides installation and technical setup, the context of the work has also changed. A year before making *News*, in 1968, Haacke gave a lecture about his artistic development. He talked about his gradual realisation of the importance of recognising movement as a defining attribute of the world surrounding us and about taking it into consequences in his artistic practise. Haacke first employed gestural abstraction and optical plays with perception. Later he moved away from creating illusionistic spaces to modeling objects with their own agency in space and their activation by audience (as possible source of energy for the object to exercise its mission). Subsequently, his focus shifted to the elements of water and air. His lecture stops there. *News* was produced next year, it was activated by an electric network and its medium was information. Another aspect of the artist's intent was to open up the art world to politics (notably, the work was created during Haacke's involvement in Art Workers Coalition, formed in order to pressure museums into ending discrimination and inequality in exhibition policy). Fifty years later, in the age of mobile devices and ubiquitous connectivity these stakes no longer resonate as strongly (Bryan-Wilson, 2009: 212), however they reveal that central to the piece are the ideas of movement of information and challenging the notion of a gallery as politically neutral space.

Like the components and coordinates of a changeable work, the artist's intent and the work's meaning are not a given either. To gain confidence in restaging such works, collecting institutions respond by accumulating documentation across systems and departments. However, when it comes to the exhibition, locating relevant bits of information often yields a painstaking process. This paper takes the case of SFMOMA's treatment of media installations and argues that documentation

management is a threefold issue. Besides adapting information systems to the cause, of the same importance are the intra- and inter-institutional collaboration and the acknowledgment of the role of conservator as a content manager.

In what follows, I first discuss the current state of the affairs in documenting media installations. Afterwards I outline the institutional model for media conservation at place in SFMOMA. Then I turn to its recent efforts to assemble installation documentation on a ‘wiki’ and situate them in the context of designing museum’s information space.<sup>68</sup> This will create a contextual space for analysing the implementation of a wiki for its collection care. I use the case to determine to what extent and under what conditions a wiki is capable of supporting collection care sufficiently enough in terms of documenting time-based art. Finally, I discuss the consequential role of conservator as an editor.

## **Documenting media installations**

Media installations like Haacke’s make evident the stakes involved in contemporary art conservation. The presentation of these works demands supplanting the idea of restoring the original state of an artwork by that of installing its iterations and acknowledging the fact that through each installation the work changes anew. Besides technical and material components and parameters, conceptual and aesthetic issues have gained a crucial importance for conservation. The works consist of multiple components (sculptural elements, hardware, software, files, etc.) and after installation, they are taken apart and stored in different locations, depending on the type of medium and their relation to the work (e.g. monitors can be reused for other exhibits). So when not installed, the work cannot be perceived and only ‘exists’ in the form of instructions and documentation (Laurenson, 2001; Phillips, 2015: 173).<sup>69</sup> This condition

68 Wiki is a website on which users collaboratively modify content and structure directly from the web browser.

69 Many conservators see the actual exhibition as the main condition of existence of installation art: “Essentially [time-based media installations] do not really exist until they are installed” (Laurenson 2001); “[A]rtists’ installations only truly exist in their

poses greater needs on documentation and its management, which in the case of such works is a complex matter (Heydenreich, 2011).

To document a time-based media artwork, Laurenson (2001) suggests to identify its components and elements (possibly including the space and acoustics), explain how they are connected, describe their roles in terms of aesthetics and functionality, and establish the factors most likely to prevent each component from fulfilling its role. Laurenson (2006) later introduced into conservation research the concept of allographicity in order to expand the focus in media conservation from the materiality of painting and sculpture to also attain for temporality and ephemerality typical for media installations. Each time a media work is installed, ‘decisions are revisited and sometimes re-made as to what aspects of the work are significant to its identity.’ Like in musical works, interpretation is often necessary and it constitutes the second phase of the work’s creation. Building upon this concept, Phillips (2015) developed a model dividing the documentation work into two stages. The first looks at its ‘score’ in general that includes the work’s identity and installation, and the second at its distinct iterations through the perspective of components, parameters and decision-making involved.

The importance of documentation in museum agendas varies widely, but it stands in the centre of work of contemporary art conservation and is key in collection care since the lives of these works of art depend on it (e.g. Dekker, 2013; Matos, et al., 2015; Barok, et al., 2019b; Barok, 2022; Falcão, et al., 2022). Knowledge about the artist’s intent, intended behaviour, spatial and technical dependencies, criteria for non-dedicated equipment, past iterations and many other aspects of the work is required to allow for interpretation. However, collections management systems are currently not fit to sufficiently support this cause alone. Taylor (2014: 129) describes challenges for collecting media art in terms of

installed state” (Scholte and ‘t Hoen, 2007: 44); “[some] time-based media works only really exist in their installed state”

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20120418000751/http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/conservation/time-based-media>, accessed 16 October 2023); “[T]he large majority of time-based media works [...] only exist when they are installed” (Phillips, 2015: 173); “[Time-based media works are] often only fully realized in their installed state” (<http://web.archive.org/web/20180628081649/https://www.moma.org/collection/about/conservation/matters-in-media-art>, accessed 16 October 2023).

defining the work in collections management systems. Ippolito (2008) notes the inability of cataloguing systems to describe the roles and changing cast of characters for an evolving work, nor the variability of its other identification elements. Van Saaze (2013: 165-8) discusses limitations of registering variable works in collections management systems developed for stable works, representing the single-artist, single-artwork paradigm. Furthermore, Engel and Wharton (2017: 294-5) observe that classification categories in standard database systems are at odds with uses of a single art object in multiple works and that the multiplicity of digital formats of artwork documentation and the relational character of complex works prevent them from facilitating searches through artwork documentation. And, most critically to our argument, Phillips states that since collection databases prescribe ‘the notion of the artwork as a contained entity with a fixed set of components, reporting different iterations of the same artwork and tracking varying component constellations for these iterations is not easily possible.’ These systems do not allow “to isolate components from the artwork’s component list - e.g. to create a relational history of component clusters - or even to document interventions and decision-making on a component level” (2015: 172).

Whether it is bound to the work in general or to its particular iterations, the process of documentation is hardly ever finished and rather leads to a growing cache of documents. The stages of its life in the collection—acquisition, exhibitions and loans—generate a varied set of documents: installation instructions, identity, condition and treatment reports, artist interviews, artist statements, correspondence, preventive conservation requirements, etc. To complicate matters, these documents come in a variety of media formats as text, image, video, audio and code. The documentation needed for restaging media installations therefore results in the complex structures of files, folders and drives subjected to intricate hierarchies of access and distributed over multiple systems. This dispersion often results in ‘siloing’ information inside various departments, which effectively prevents research and collaboration in museums. In the end, it becomes a challenge to get a good sense of the work in the usually limited time frame of setting up a new exhibition.

There is an obvious need to organise documentation in a way that prepares the artwork for its future display. To understand the piece, one

needs to be able to easily navigate the great variety of elements related to its documentation and conservation. Besides having access to its recorded identity and installation instructions, one must also be able to consult various iterations of the work and, for each, learn about decision making involved on the component level as well as about relations between its elements, supported by multimedia content where necessary.

Beyond infrastructure, I argue that organising the access to dispersed, varied and complex documentation is an issue of collaboration across (and beyond) departments, and of the role of the conservator as a content manager. The three aspects—infrastructure, collaboration and content management—are mutually intertwined.

In recent years, several initiatives responded to these persisting challenges by implementing novel supporting platforms. Systems such as wikis came into focus as a prominent choice for managing documentation of complex artworks. The most well known among them, MediaWiki, is a content management system originally built for the Wikipedia encyclopaedia. It is free to be repurposed practically without any restrictions. The ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe had been using MediaWiki to support work in a number of its departments, including media conservation, between 2006 and 2015.<sup>70</sup> Guggenheim Museum's Panza Collection Initiative (2010-2016) employed Confluence wiki to address the long-term preservation and future exhibition of works of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily Minimalist, Post-Minimalist, and Conceptual art.<sup>71</sup> In 2013, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) started using MediaWiki as a resource integrating documentation of media installations in its collection (Haidvogl & White, 2020). Between 2014 and 2017, SFMOMA used Confluence wiki as documentation resource for The Artist Initiative featuring research engagements with artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Vija Celmins and Julia Scher to support the preservation and display of their works in the collection.<sup>72</sup> Also, New York University's

<sup>70</sup> The use of wiki was discontinued following the decision to reduce the number of information systems after the merge of ZKM's Media Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art into a single entity (Morgane Stricot, in-person interview, 13 April 2018).

<sup>71</sup> Jill Sterrett, in-person interview, 26 February 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Presentation by Meredith VanDyke at SFMOMA's 'Study Day' meeting, 1 March 2018. For more on the Artist Initiative see Clark & Barger, 2016.

Artist Archive Initiative, launched in 2017, has opted for MediaWiki to create knowledge bases on the oeuvres of artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Joan Jonas (Engel & Wharton, 2017).<sup>73</sup>

Albeit the wikis of all mentioned initiatives respond primarily to the intentions to document more sufficiently complex art in respective collections, they vary greatly in their content structure, functionality and design. This paper focuses on one of them. Since most of the mentioned projects are not active at the moment and the Artist Archive Initiative is not connected to a museum collection, I take the case of the SFMOMA MediaWiki.<sup>74</sup>

## Institutional memory through collaboration

Time-based media arts form one of the pillars of the SFMOMA's collection and therefore one of the main domains of collection care.<sup>75</sup> As a key strategy to address the needs of these works, the museum developed a model for media conservation. Acknowledging the necessary interdependence of curatorial, conservation and technical support for this cause, it has reinforced internal interdisciplinary collaboration as well as participation in cross-institutional networks.

The sustained focus on presenting and collecting time-based media art at SFMOMA came in 1988 when under director John R. Lane the museum established a curatorial post for media arts, taken up by Robert R. Riley.<sup>76</sup> One of his first shows was *American Landscape Video*, which was instrumental for setting forward the path of exhibitions, collections, and conservation of these 'great ideas in fugitive forms' (Smith, 2010: 16). From

73 More instances of the use of wikis for collection care may exist, however no such survey has been published so far.

74 The chapter is based on field research conducted by author at SFMOMA in February-March 2018.

75 As of 2016, the museum holds 300 interactive art installations (<https://blog.wikimedia.org/2016/07/07/sfmoma-mediawiki/>, accessed 16 October 2023).

76 SFMOMA's media arts curators included Robert Riley (1988-2000), Benjamin Weil (2000-2006), and Rudolf Frieling (since 2006). Assistant media arts curators included Kathleen Forde (1999-2002) and Tanya Zimbardo (since 2009).

among the works displayed there, Steina Vasulka's 'horizontally drifting' twenty-two-monitor video and sound installation *The West* (1983) was acquired by SFMOMA, becoming Vasulka's first museum purchase.<sup>77</sup> The curator also carried out historical survey exhibitions such as *Bay Area Media* (1990), *The Projected Image* (1991), *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media* (1996), and *Seeing Time* (1999-2000).<sup>78</sup>

Riley oversaw collecting not only contemporary works, but also aimed to establish a history of media arts, going back up to twenty years to retrieve works that in some cases have been lost and have required complete recreation. Across museum departments, he argued that unlike other works, media art demands us to accept it as a changeable and durable object and to acknowledge the consequences for the institution:

I spent a long time scaring people, people in traditional disciplines of registration and collection and exhibition that it wasn't a static object, it was an experience, it was a time-based piece, what amounted to the work of art was often in opposition to what the traditional museum would think was a work of art. [...] [T]he most important thing to do to establish [the museum's] department [for media arts] was to share with the entire team of the museum and the conservation department, registration, everything else, about the type of respect for this kind of art that's very important for this time in the century.<sup>79</sup>

77 On acquiring the work see Smith, 2010: 33-5.

78 Instrumental for staging and preserving media works has been museum's close collaboration with Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), an organisation founded in 1976 to provide broadcast quality equipment access, technical services and assistance, training and information to the nonprofit sector and since the 1980s pioneering video preservation.

79 He continued: "[W]e'll think about the material of this nature, and how it's very important for understanding our own times, how it's very important for understanding this quickly accelerated phenomenon of our own perceptual capacities, as we've gone from the projected image in a gallery situation, to a whole socially bound culture that seems to be connected to electronic media, so we want to, of course, preserve all these early experiments for the benefit of time to come"

(<http://cool.conservation-us.org/byorg/bavc/pb96/transc/pt1b.html>, accessed 16 October 2023).

While Riley's role of media arts curator included preservation, media arts programme assistants assumed responsibility for its various aspects—"the care, installation, maintenance, and tracking of components which comprise the artwork" (Graham & Sterrett, 1997). Their job was "part installation, part registration, and part conservation" (Graham & Sterrett, 1997). Increasingly, registrars and conservators have also played a role in ensuring the long-term care of this collection section. They recognised the central role of collaboration and documentation. Conservator and the future director of collections Jill Sterrett spoke about the need for special care that media arts require: "What is needed is an institutional memory which can recall a detailed account of the look, feel and intention of the piece and the institutional foresight to anticipate the future trajectory of its ongoing technological evolution."<sup>80</sup> As Phillips (2013) emphasises, the responsibility for building up this knowledge should not be outsourced "by relying on the artist or the artist's studio to install or update the piece."

To improve collaboration in the institution, in 1995 a working group - Team Media - has been formed as a platform for dialogue across departments (Sterrett & Coddington, 2017). The fluid group has included curators, conservators, collection managers, cataloguers, registrars, and A/V team and meets regularly to discuss time-based media works in the collection.<sup>81</sup> Discussions and negotiations about their installations, accessioning, lending and documentation have informed their recognition and treatment of these works in the museum. Sterrett, whose position of Director of Collections and Conservation makes her coordinator of this group, emphasises collaboration as its uniting element: "We upped our game by leaning on each other and, as a result, a deep culture of collaboration took root. Team Media has been at the center of our ever-expanding programme of acquisition, display, and care of electronic media arts and design" (Sterrett & Coddington, 2017).

Laurenson (2013) identifies this institutional model for media conservation as the 'interdisciplinary team.' Laurenson notes that the

<sup>80</sup> [http://web.archive.org/web/20151012002333/http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/emg/meetings/past/1997-san-diego\\_emsig/#jj](http://web.archive.org/web/20151012002333/http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/emg/meetings/past/1997-san-diego_emsig/#jj), accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>81</sup> For an account from one such meeting see <https://www.sfmoma.org/read/team-media-action-contemplation/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

model ‘recognises that responding effectively to changing artistic practice involves an engagement throughout the museum.’ She adds that it can only be successful with ‘a commitment and an institutional culture of collaborative working,’ while its strength is that it does not require recruiting more personnel or outsourcing the responsibility for works. Another example of this approach is MoMA’s Media Working Group that was first set up in 2007. In contrast, other institutions such as Tate and Guggenheim rely mostly on their specialist conservation section, while the responsibility in Centre Pompidou is retained by a specialist curatorial department, as it was in SFMOMA before Team Media emerged.<sup>82</sup>

The existence of an interdisciplinary team increased the mandate and competency of SFMOMA to engage in cross-institutional collaboration in media conservation. Coinciding with the establishment of Team Media, in 1996 the museum hosted *Playback '96: Video Preservation Roundtable*, the first international working group and symposium bringing together the fields of conservation, museology, and media arts to address technical and ethical issues surrounding video preservation. Participants included conservators, scientists, video artists, media curators, television engineers, archivists, librarians and preservation administrators.<sup>83</sup> The two-day gathering was preceded by eight months of research in working groups examining various aspects of video preservation and the conservation of installation art.<sup>84</sup> It had been assumed from the outset that preserving video works has to take into account artist’s intent and engage in appropriate documentation, as much from conservators as from curators. At her opening speech, the then museum’s head of conservation Inge-Lise Eckmann emphasized the importance of documentation:

82 Finally, organisations such as LIMA in the Netherlands operate as external agencies.

83 The symposium was organised by BAVC with assistance from AIC and Media Alliance and was supported by the Getty Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080405003111/http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byorg/bavc/pb96/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

84 The themes included the maintenance of installation art using technology, ethical considerations in videotape preservation, changes in technology and practice, etc. For a full list of sessions and transcripts see

<http://cool.conservation-us.org/byorg/bavc/pb96/transc/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

One of the key elements towards the preservation [...] is the documentation of those works. In some cases, the documentation is going to be a much more durable record than the work itself, and when the artist can be a part of that documentation process, including not only the physical characteristics and the technical aspects, but to some extent giving a clear idea to the museum what the artist's intent is, and what is the aesthetic component in the intent, as difficult as it is to distill that down and articulate it.<sup>85</sup>

In the following year, the museum participated in setting up a platform for these conversations on the national level, the Electronic Media Group (EMG) of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC).<sup>86</sup> The *TechArchaeology: A Symposium on Installation Art Preservation* that followed in 2000 brought together twenty-five curators, conservators, and artists to examine the works from the exhibition *Seeing Time* staged at the museum.<sup>87</sup> The project followed similar model like in *Playback '96*, but instead of individual themes, working groups did case studies on particular works and explored common themes. With the arrival of Benjamin Weil as media arts curator, the launch of E-space online gallery in 2000 and staging of the instrumental *010101: Art in Technological Times* show (2001), the museum has dived into the issues of preserving internet art as well (Verschooren 2007, 7-8).

More recently, the museum acknowledged the importance of collaborative modes also in its architectural expansion of 2016. Media workstation is situated within the conservation department and includes a spatial studio space which is directly adjacent to galleries (Haidvogl 2013).

These threads were part of the large-scale tendency of conservation research to embrace media arts that has ever since leaned towards working together across domains and geographies. Its landmarks included the international research projects *Preservation Video Art* carried

<sup>85</sup> <http://cool.conservation-us.org/byorg/bavc/pb96/transc/pt1a.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>86</sup> The Group was officially formed after its first two sessions, in 1998. It is hosted by Stanford University.

<sup>87</sup> The symposium was organised by BAVC.

out by the Dutch organisation NIMK (2000-2003), the *Variable Media Network* consortium founded by Guggenheim and the Daniel Langlois Foundation (2001-2004), *404 Object Not Found* managed by medien\_kunst\_netz in Germany (2002-2003), and *Inside Installations* coordinated by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (2004-2007). In addition, between 2003 and 2015, SFMOMA had partnered with the New Art Trust, MoMA and Tate in establishing guidelines for the care of media art, as part of the *Matters in Media Art* consortium.<sup>88</sup>

## **Assembling installation documentation**

Even if artworks are well documented, based on the input of multiple stakeholders, it becomes clear that when it comes to access and exhibition, it is highly time-consuming to collect relevant documents many of which are accessible only to particular departments or persons, scattered various formats across databases, drives and stacks. This section analyses the form, content and use of binders that SFMOMA devised to deal with this problem.<sup>89</sup>

In connection to the ongoing research in *Matters in Media Art*, the museum's media conservator Martina Haidvogl has designed a system to document complex art installations.<sup>90</sup> In its early phase, the system involved maintaining a 'preservation dossier' for each work. The dossier was essentially a ring binder bringing together documentation of various aspects of the work relevant for keeping it present in the institutional memory (Figure 4). Its structure has been devised in tandem with the museum's engagement in media arts conservation research. Describing in detail the 'look, feel and intention' of media installations is something that is practiced across positions and across departments. From the start, dossiers were designed as multi-authored, multi-voice records. Any

88 <http://mattersinmediaart.org>, accessed 16 October 2023.

89 This section is largely based on interviews with Martina Haidvogl, SFMOMA, 22 and 26 February 2018.

90 Haidvogl, a video conservator working with Agathe Jarczyk in Bern, Switzerland, was invited in 2011 for a fellowship at the museum and eventually took on a full-time position as media conservator.

department having relevant documents would make hard copies and file them in the respective folder for each concerned artwork. Curators would provide their descriptions along with contracts, A/V team and technicians would author ‘technical narrative’ and assemble installation instructions together with conservators and registrars who would add preservation requirements, collect interviews and correspondence with the artist and gallery and contribute materials on respective exhibitions and loans.<sup>91</sup>

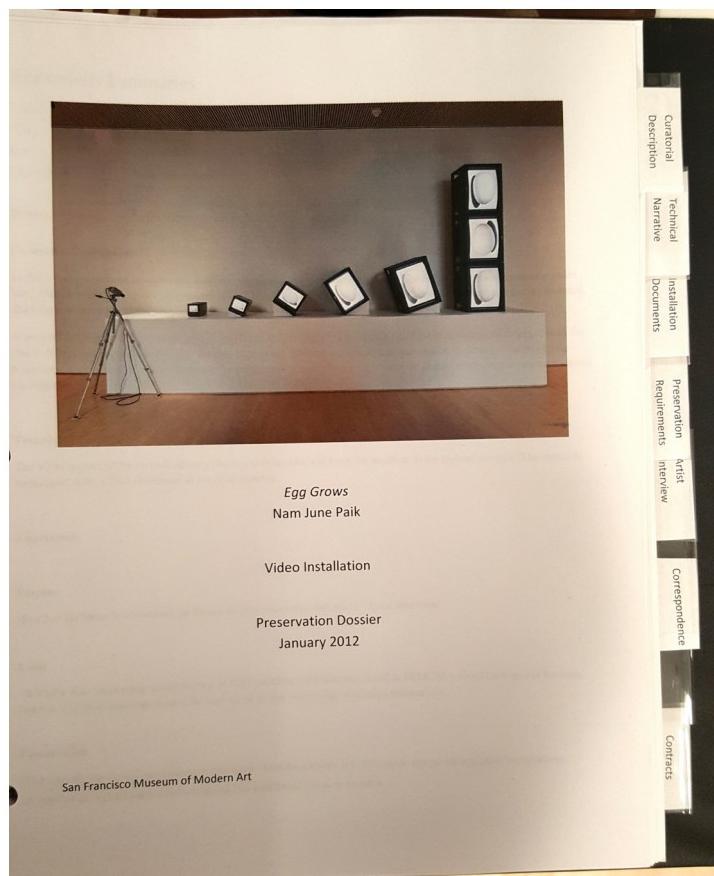


Figure 4. SFMOMA’s preservation dossier on Nam June Paik’s *Egg Grows* [1984–1989], 2012. The dossier is made up of several sections: curatorial description, technical narrative, installation documents, preservation requirements, artist interview, correspondence, exhibitions and loans, and contracts. Photo: Dušan Barok.

A dossier was created almost exclusively on the occasion of an exhibition. The reports and materials were compiled mostly after the initial installation process, before a work went down. Documents from

<sup>91</sup> On technical narrative as documentation tool see Engel and Hellar, 2014, and Ensom, 2019.

across museum's information systems, intranet drives, and paper folders were filed in a single dossier per artwork. In result, dossiers brought documents from various formats into a common medium, paper. The complexity of access control was reduced to having all dossiers available on a single shelf above conservator's desk in a relatively easily accessible office.

One of the main challenges was to coordinate this process. The original intention was that the members of staff involved in setting up an installation would print out relevant documents and file them in the respective folder. However, in practice, Haidvogl assumed the role of inquiring particular people for particular documents in various levels of urgency and of filing. The conservator hesitantly took up the role of managing the overall editorial process.

Dossiers were meant to aid collaboration in the institution, however besides the shared responsibility for their maintenance being reduced to a single person, their material form posed obstacles as well. Making a dossier is a laborious process because documents have to be copied or printed, perforated and filed. In addition, by being bound in a ring the dossier resists easy reproduction and exists only as a single volume per artwork, unavailable when checked out.

Besides its great demands on coordination, the material form of a dossier created limitations in practical use in terms of access, production and reproduction and it proved not flexible enough to serve as inter-departmental communication medium. After several months, it became evident that in this approach to tying together documentation, shortcomings surpass benefits. An alteration addressing these shortcomings would be to make the dossier digital, and embed it within the museum's digital information space (Figure 5).

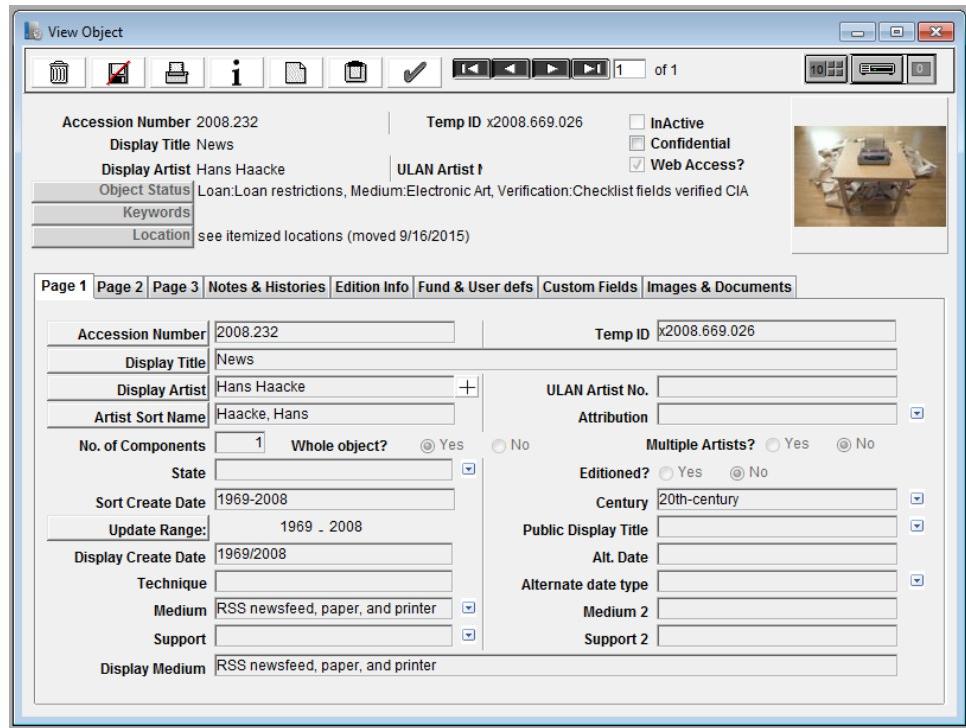


Figure 5. The main screen of an entry on Hans Haacke's installation *News* (1969/2008) in EmbARK. Courtesy of SFMOMA.

## Museum information space

The SFMOMA's information architecture counts a wide variety of systems (Figure 6), each with its own idiosyncrasies and demands on the user. I will first introduce structure and context of the collection-related 'information commons' in order to understand how a new information system would fit in this framework.<sup>92</sup>

From the perspective of collection documentation, information relevant to the sustainability of an artwork begins to be collected long before the work enters the building. Descriptions of components of the work, the intention behind it and various spatial and technical dependencies are accumulated in mailboxes and harddrives of curators, conservators and other staff. Large museums like SFMOMA operate a

<sup>92</sup> Layna White, the museum's Head of Collections Information and Access, employs the term 'information commons' as a preferred one to 'CIA' her department is colloquially referred to (in-person interview, 20 February 2018).

complex patchwork of digital systems and channels for organising information relevant to a specific artwork in their collections.

These computer systems span decades back. The earliest is EmbARK, embraced by the museum in 1995.<sup>93</sup> Its original promise was simple—to *manage* collections using a single system present across the museum's computer network. EmbARK was created as part of the wave of a new generation of collections management systems running on relational databases (RDMBS), which began to emerge in the mid-1980s.<sup>94</sup> The company behind it, California-based Digital Collections, Inc., saw business potential in licensing digital images of artworks.<sup>95</sup> It began developing EmbARK in 1993 as a next level, 'image-centric' collections management system with the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University and the SFMOMA among its original development partners.<sup>96</sup> Shortly after the system was fully deployed at SFMOMA, the company was merged with Gallery Systems, the firm responsible for The Museum System (TMS), a collections management system originally developed for the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>97</sup> Today, while TMS has been claimed as the most extensively used management system for conservation documentation in art museums (Green & Mustalish, 2009: 8), EmbARK is generally

93 Following its reopening in a new facility

(<https://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2003/papers/mitroff/mitroff.html>, accessed 16 October 2023).

94 Early collections management systems for minicomputers include Vernon Systems (first introduced in 1985), Argus (1986), KE-EMu (1986), The Museum System (1987), and Re:discovery (1989). They are all based on the relational database.

95 The company provided access to digital images through the Internet and CD-ROM discs, similarly to Bill Gates' Corbis  
(<http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19950314&slug=2110154>, accessed 16 October 2023).

96 <http://web.archive.org/web/19971011061132/http://www.dascorp.com:80/company/>, <http://web.archive.org/web/19971011061257/http://www.dascorp.com:80/products/embark/>, both accessed 16 October 2023.

97 For a review of The Museum System see Swank, 2008: 37-41, and Carpinone, 2010: 79-92.

considered its ‘junior version.’<sup>98</sup> It is used only rarely, despite being more lightweight and affordable (Green & Mustalish, 2009: 38).<sup>99</sup>

EmbARK was built as desktop software, in principle as the computerised database version of the collection catalogue enabling such new functions as automated search and remote access. Despite the current status quo of web-basedness of applications, it remains bound to desktop. The software was designed in the mid-1990s using the then fast spreading technology of relational database that was then bound to desktop applications. Around that time, the World Wide Web also started to gain traction, however it represented a different tradition. Websites offer graphical extension to networked communication and data transfer. Unlike databases that are relational on the level of meticulously structured data items, websites offer relationality on the level of linked ‘freestyle’ documents. It would take several years before MySQL clients and Apache webservers would gain traction and bring these two paradigms together.<sup>100</sup> However, EmbARK remains to be a desktop application without a programming interface (API) and its further development is greatly limited by its employment of the now little used 4D database system.<sup>101</sup>

98 For a functional analysis of EmbARK and TMS see Carpinone, 2010: 79-92. For an authoritative overview of collections management systems see <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/software/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

99 For a full list of clients as of 2009 see [http://web.archive.org/web/20090320024038/www.gallerysystems.com/embarkusers/EmbARK\\_client\\_list.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20090320024038/www.gallerysystems.com/embarkusers/EmbARK_client_list.pdf), accessed 16 October 2023. For a comparison of prices of selected collections management systems, see Carpinone, 2010: 67.

100 In 2003, the museum began using the recently developed web module for EmbARK to include identification information and images of artworks on its public website, although it proved incompatible with the site-wide search and required workarounds. For more, see <https://museumsandtheweb.com/mw2003/papers/mitroff/mitroff.html>, accessed 16 October 2023. Since 2018, this process has been managed by daily exports of data from EmbARK to a ‘shadow database’, from where it is passed to the Django content management system that handles the website.

101 4D is a proprietary database system and programming language developed in the mid-1980s as Apple’s “brand” database. However, it was never deployed on this scale.

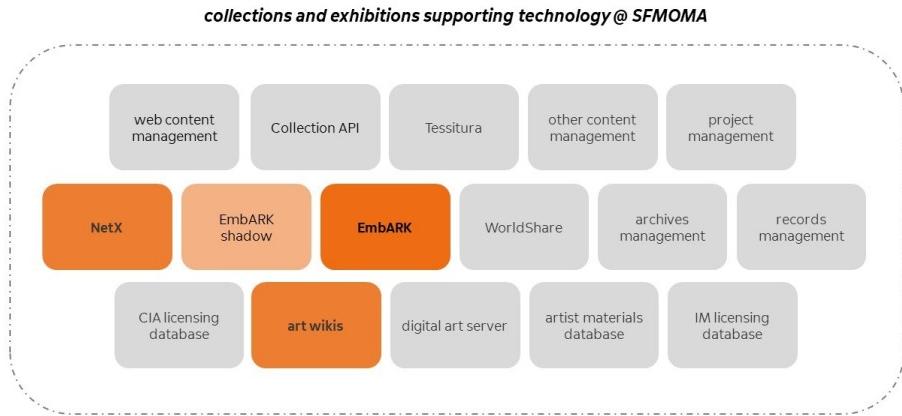


Figure 6. Diagram of SFMOMA's information space, highlighting current systems discussed in this paper. Courtesy of Layna White, SFMOMA.

In spite of all of its idiosyncrasies, EmbARK has been central to SFMOMA's collection management.<sup>102</sup> This is where registrars compile identification data and create additional records for each component. Collection managers, curators and conservators add notes specific to the work, even though many of the staff and collaborators do not interact with the collections management system at all and keep documents using their own means. The proper documentation of an installation usually happens before it goes down from the show. This is the point when the piece has been 'stabilised' and members of the team are confident to retrospectively describe how they reached this point. Reports are stored in a collections management system and on shared drives or paper folders of respective departments. Photographs and visual documentation are collected on shared drives from where it is meant to be copied further to 'Digital Garden,' the digital asset management system the museum has been running since 2013.<sup>103</sup> Contrary to EmbARK, Digital Garden comes with a clean and easy to use interface and it is available through a web browser.

102 The museum is currently working on replacing the system with an alternative.

103 Between 2006-2013, the museum had been using MediaBin as its digital asset management system. The decision to present new system in the museum as Digital Garden instead of its product brand, "NetX", has been purposeful, coming from a conviction that setting a specific tone and vibe around it as experience is crucial. It is made to be a pleasant place after all (Layna White, in-person interview, 20 February 2018).

Introducing another system into this framework demands addressing justified concerns over creating redundant and further scattering documentation. Another concern is that learning and maintaining a wiki requires a special lasting effort from the members of the staff. And so its embedment in the information space needs to be negotiated.

## Digital dossiers

What is to answer next is what digital solution would be suitable to replace the paper-based preservation dossiers. It should meet the key criteria for supporting media art documentation which are not provided by the systems already put in place (for collection and digital asset management), while not yielding additional obstacles in conservation process. The criteria discussed above include:

- Straightforward navigation through documentation associated with an artwork.
- Support for differentiating between identity and installation of a given work on the one hand, and its respective iterations on the other.
- Support for documenting decision making on the component level.
- Support for linking components and elements of a work.
- Support for multimedia content.
- Version control including history of changes and identification of their authors.
- Integration of the platform within the information infrastructure.

To make a paper dossier digital, one could simply scan it into a PDF file. The PDF (Portable Document Format) is now an ISO standard for digital documents.<sup>104</sup> The self-contained and compact format is readily usable for electronic distribution, display on the screen and professional print. However, for the purpose of creating reference for preservation, this is impractical. If not for other reasons, then for the hassle with

<sup>104</sup> Adobe Systems Incorporated, original developer and copyright owner of the format, decided to relinquish control of PDF to ISO in 2008.

inconsistent versions of dossier due to changes and additions. It would exist as a paper dossier and simultaneously as multiple copies of PDFs of its various versions.

Instead, one may opt to minimise the need for printing and scanning and rather collect source files from which they were printed for a dossier: Word documents, images, PDFs, email threads and scanned documents. It does make sense to have a shared space where they can be situated together. This space, presenting a collection of multimedia documentation on artworks, would primarily serve not a single department, but museum staff in general, ideally generations of museum staff. The variety of file formats in such a collection however presents a problem for concise presentation. One option would be an intricate file manager known to the staff from operating their shared drives through Finder and File Explorer. However, this is only a partial solution to the problem, especially due to the fragmentation of information into individual files, the lack of file previews, the lack of versioning, and the lack of remote access. A more distributed solution such as Git would help the issues of access, versioning and previews of some formats, however it too offers only a highly fragmented and impractical perspective on the artwork and, in addition, requires relatively high technical skills.<sup>105</sup>

Another candidate, collections management systems, generally lack sufficient support for multiple iterations of an artwork, for relations between its elements, and often also the above-mentioned features. Digital asset management systems are highly adequate for handling large quantities of multimedia content such images and video, however they fall short of structuring and describing context around artworks.

Instead, Haidvogl foresighted utilising a content management system, a web-native space with inclusive interface design where respective files from a dossier would be displayed side by side in a continuous succession of narratives.<sup>106</sup> Multimedia and other files would

<sup>105</sup> For an assessment of the use of Git for archiving and conservation of digital art see Barok, et al. (2019b).

<sup>106</sup> Confusingly, content management systems abbreviate as ‘CMS’ just like collections management systems. As will be shown later, I understand them distinctly: content management systems primarily as web publishing platforms, while collections management systems fundamentally as cataloguing systems with additional features.

be linked, ideally embedded within. Entries on artworks would be structured as in a dossier. The system would have version control. As the work of Team Media has shown, media installations have the ability to bring people across departments together and this place should be their platform, at hand to everyone in the group.

The choice fell on a wiki, despite being employed in the museum context only scarcely. Wikis emerged in the mid-1990s as software and websites allowing users to comment on and change one another's text. They were designed to link together people's experiences to create a new literature documenting their shared areas of interests, and to harness people's natural desire to talk and tell stories with a technology that would feel comfortable to those not used to 'authoring' (Venners, 2003). Since the early 2000s, wikis have been increasingly adopted as collaborative software used for project communication, intranets, and documentation. The single most popular wiki software today, MediaWiki, has been deployed as free and open-source content management system to serve the needs of the Wikipedia encyclopedia ever since its foundation in 2002. It is attached to the ideas of stability and scalability (Wikipedia is able to sustain itself, and it is vast). Even though it is able to serve so a massive project, MediaWiki is relatively simple to get running. The open source approach to both the wiki software and website has helped to attract a community of editors and developers sustaining a large ecology of readily available plugins and extensions. Today it serves not only as a major encyclopedia, but also library, glossary, and news media.<sup>107</sup>

## **Adapting MediaWiki for media art documentation**

Since MediaWiki is a general-purpose content management system, it does not meet the special needs of media conservation out of the box. It has to be adapted in terms of user interface, structure, functionality and workflow.

<sup>107</sup> See <https://wikipedia.org>, <https://wikisource.org>, <https://Wiktionary.org>, and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Current\\_events](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Current_events), respectively, all accessed 16 October 2023.

The SFMOMA Media Wiki has been set up in June 2013 by the museum's technology consultant Mark Hellar (Figure 7). First running on default interface, Haidvogl has later greatly modernised it and aligned it with the museum's identity design. The platform operates as a website, internally available through a web browser from stations and devices inside the museum.

The shift from paper dossiers to wiki involved the gradual update of the structure of its artwork page template (Figure 8). The sections include identification information, installation shots, curatorial description, technical narrative, the listing of components, exhibition history, installation instructions, detailed description of respective installations of a work - its iterations, a section with manuals and hardware information, the list of all references in the article, and general categories (to enable listings of artworks per artist, production year, and type).

A second, multi-page template, has been created for large-scale complex installations (Figure 9) such as Julia Scher's *Predictive Engineering*. This work has been reconceived with the artist's input for three distinct museum's locations since 1993. In order to maintain the concept of the work to 'encourage viewers to confront the ways in which security and surveillance can serve as mechanisms for social control,' the installation setup and media have been updated for each iteration to correspond with the state-of-the-art technology.<sup>108</sup> Its respective iterations are documented on three sub-pages entitled 'episodes' (as the artist likes to call them). Several other works in the collection are documented based on this template (for example William Kentridge's immersive kinetic installation *The Refusal of Time*). The majority of the works however exist as single pages.

108 For more see

[https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/sfmomamedia/media/uploads/files/Transcript\\_Predictive\\_Engineering\\_Colloquium\\_Artist\\_Initiative\\_Response\\_09\\_16\\_2017.pdf](https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/sfmomamedia/media/uploads/files/Transcript_Predictive_Engineering_Colloquium_Artist_Initiative_Response_09_16_2017.pdf) and <https://sfmoma.org/julia-scher-predictive-engineering/>, both accessed 16 October 2023.

News Actions



Artist Name [Hans Haacke](#)

Artist Description German, born 1936

Title *News*

Year 1969/2008

Description RSS newsfeed, paper, and printer

Credit Line Collection SFMOMA. Purchase through gifts of Helen Crocker Russell, the Crocker Family, and anonymous donors, by exchange, and the Accessions Committee Fund

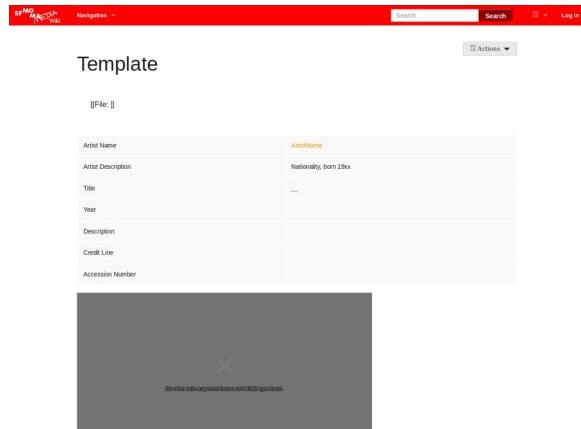
Accession Number 2008.232

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Figure 7. Top section of the page documenting Hans Haacke's *News* in SFMOMA Media Wiki. Courtesy of SFMOMA.



**Template**

[[File:]]

Artist Name	ArtistName
Artist Description	Nationality, born place
Title	—
Year	—
Description	—
Credit Line	—
Accession Number	—

Contents

- 1 Curatorial Description
- 2 Technical Narrative
- 3 Components
- 4 Exhibitions
- 5 Installation
- 6 Iterations
- 7 Manuals and hardware information
- 8 References

**Curatorial Description**

**Technical Narrative**

**Components**

**Exhibitions**

• year, title

Wall text  
Author  
Title

**Installation**

Room Requirements

**Iterations**

year, nameofexhibition

**Installation Team and Parameters**

Equipment List, as installed

**Floor Plan**

**Signal Flow Diagram**

**Settings**

**Exhibition Copies**

**Fabrication**

**Decision Making**

**Iteration Specific Modifications**

**Maintenance**

**Security and Safety**

**Evaluation**

**Artist commentary**

**Notes**

**Images**

[[File:]]      [[File:]]      [[File:]]

**Manuals and hardware information**

**References**

[[Category:]] [[Category:]] [[Category:]]

Categories:      Artwork

Figure 8. Page template of SFMOMA Media Wiki. Courtesy of SFMOMA.

The figure consists of three screenshots of a MediaWiki page template, labeled Template 2, used for more complex artworks. Each screenshot shows a different section of the template.

- Template 2 (Left):** This template includes a table for artist and artwork details. The table has columns for Artist Name, Artist Description, Title, Year, Description, Credit Line, and Accession Number. Below the table is a 'References' section with a link to edit the source code. Categories listed include [[Category:]], [[Category:]], and [[Category:]].
- Template 2 (Middle):** This template features a large central box containing text about an exhibition. The text includes 'year, SFMOMA - link-to-page', 'Exhibition Title, dates', 'venue', 'Curator:', and 'Artists:'. Below this box is a 'References' section with a link to edit the source code. Categories listed include [[Category:]], [[Category:]], and [[Category:]].
- Template 2 (Right):** This template includes a table for artist and artwork details, similar to the first one. Below the table is a 'References' section with a link to edit the source code. Categories listed include [[Category:]], [[Category:]], and [[Category:]].

Figure 9. (a-c) Page template 2 of SFMOMA Media Wiki, used for more complex artworks. Courtesy of SFMOMA.

The entry on Hans Haacke's work *News* has been created following its first installation after the adoption of MediaWiki in the museum, in 2018. The staff produces wiki entries, like dossiers earlier, almost strictly on the occasion of exhibitions because this is when the knowledge about installation and maintenance of a given artwork is generated. This also explains why the artwork did not have its own dedicated dossier: the

dossier procedure was put in place only years after its previous installation of 2006 and by now it had been replaced by a wiki page.

During the five months of exhibition, three members of staff each made changes to the page. First, in the second month of the exhibition, the media conservator created a dedicated page based on the wiki artwork template (see Figure 8), and populated some of its sections: identification data were copied from the collections management system, installation views were taken from the digital asset management system, a curatorial description from curatorial defense written for the artwork's acquisition back in 2008, components from the collections management system, and artist's parameters for the printer, news sources, software, and room were taken over from email correspondence. The conservator also wrote down the names of members of the installation team and the list of (non-dedicated) equipment, and linked the entry to categories corresponding to the artist, year of production and media ('Live', 'RSS feed'). A week later, the curator responsible for the piece included wall texts (for both the work and the exhibition it was part of) and wrote a short safety report about behaviour and instructions for visitors on interacting with the printer and printouts. Before the work went down, at the point when it was 'stabilised,' a member of the installation team wrote a report about its maintenance—the frequency and timing of replacement of ink cartridges and paper rolls and adjustments of paper pile—and uploaded the user manual for printer (sourced from the company website). The authored section on maintenance as well as that on safety also discuss decision-making involved in the process. Most sections have references describing their original sources. Still missing from the page is a technical narrative which would explain the configuration and control of the printer and software.

While most of this information can be located in the collections management system and the digital asset management system, the approach based on MediaWiki introduces a number of improvements. Rather than being spread across multiple systems and menus, information here is presented on a single page. The page can be structured at will, even using multiple tabs per screen, which means it does allow for nuanced composition consisting of multiple sections and subsections, while providing enough space for contextual description,

including multimedia content. In this way, a wiki provides most of the practical knowledge necessary to consider an installation of the artwork in the future, ready to be presented to a third party interested in its loan as well. The sharing capacity is however only non-direct, since MediaWiki does not offer a way to safely provide external access to selected pages on an otherwise private instance. A workaround is to export PDFs that can be shared beyond the walls of an institution, although this solution does not preserve the functionality of links and multimedia. Other critical limitations include the absence of nuanced file management and the need on users to get acquainted with its structure and markup language. These require serious efforts on the side of both technical administrators and operators of the system. Still, MediaWiki is geared toward collaboration: it comes with version tracking functions, it is highly configurable, and to a certain degree it can also interface with other systems. The system has a built-in reference functionality allowing users to identify sources of the information entered. In summary, MediaWiki has the capacity to format art documentation as multimedia publication, without sacrificing basic database functions, and if designed with care it may indeed offer straightforward navigation through documentation associated with an artwork.

<b>GUGGENHEIM</b>		<b>Iteration Report</b>	
Conservation Department			
<b>Artwork</b>	Accession No.:	<i>Thumbnail Image</i>	
	Artist:		
	Title:		
	©, Year:		
<b>Exhibition</b>	Title:		
	Date:		
	Venue:		
<b>Iteration</b>	<b>Created / supervised by:</b> (Who had an impact on the appearance of this iteration?)		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Curator(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Registrar(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Art Handler(s)/ASaP:
	<input type="checkbox"/> Exhibition Designer(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Artist(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Consultant(s):
	<input type="checkbox"/> Media Technician(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Artist Assistant(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> External Company:
	<input type="checkbox"/> Conservator(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Fabricator(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Others:
	<b>Who installed the artwork, for how long?</b> (List names, and/or skill-sets, and add the hours/days per person.)		
	Was the artist present/represented during the (entire) install? If not, how (closely) did the artist monitor/influence this iteration?		
	<b>Evaluation of this Iteration:</b>		
	1. Was the iteration considered to be successful, or less successful? Why? (Source, Date)		
	2. Did the artist(s) see and/or approve this iteration?		
3. Were there any unsolved problems or suggestions for future improvements? (Source, Date)			
<b>Images, as installed:</b>			

Figure 10. The first page of four of Guggenheim's Iteration Report. Courtesy of Guggenheim Museum.

The structure of iteration documentation employed by SFMOMA was originally inspired by Guggenheim's *Iteration Report* published in 2012 (Figure 10).<sup>109</sup> In principle, both models capture iterations through their components, parameters, decision making and other aspects. An interesting difference between these two models is in what constitutes a

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.guggenheim.org/news/guggenheimorg-highlights-conservation-of-time-based-media-art>, accessed 16 October 2023.

single report. Phillips's (2015) model understands documentation as a process of producing a series of object reports. First, an identity report is produced, from which installation instructions for particular iterations are derived and in turn, each iteration is documented in an iteration report. The iteration report feeds new findings about identity of the work back to identity report, and so on. This distinction follows the two-tier structure, built upon Laurenson's (2006) concept of allographicity, where the identity report together with installation instructions represent the score that is each time interpreted as an iteration, documented separately. On the other hand, the practice on SFMOMA MediaWiki is such that all this information usually rests on a single page. Even if structurally and conceptually the iteration documentation is divided from the other content on the page, it is not trivial to identify which reporting corresponds to the score, and which belongs strictly to an iteration. In the case of Haacke's *News*, the page includes sections containing curatorial description, the listing of component and brief installation instructions provided by the artist on the occasion of acquisition (following the first display of the work in the museum in 2008), all of which are relevant for the work's score, while lessons learnt about its maintenance during its 2018 exhibition are described only in the iteration documentation.

Another difference between Guggenheim's and SFMOMA's reporting of iterations, and one that is crucial to this argument, has to do with the affordances of the medium of reporting. Whereas Guggenheim's reports are forms with a fixed structure, stored as PDFs or Word documents on a hard drive (which brings us back to our discussion of 'digital dossiers'), SFMOMA's reports are much more fluid. The structure of each artwork page is based on one of the two wiki templates, but contributors are allowed to adapt the structure to the specifics of a given artwork. Headings can be adjusted, sections can be nested, new sections can be added, and iterations can be split into separate tabs or pages if they are too complex.

This fluidity is crucial. Artworks have different needs, especially media works and performances. For example, the artist may have a particular vocabulary for the work, as when Julia Scher refers to exhibitions of her Projective Engineering as 'episodes' rather than 'iterations.' Software-based works have dependencies on operating

systems and online services that need to be specified in a particular way. Performances operate with a different vocabulary from installations: they are executed rather than installed, run to a script rather than ‘installation instructions’, employ performers or interpreters—not fitting the category of ‘components,’ etc. Participatory works such as Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher’s *Learning to Love You More* (2002-2009) contain thousands of different objects - an archive of objects rather than a set of ‘components.’ Adherence to a strict reporting structure would make it more difficult to record certain types of artwork, which in turn would cause documentation to flow into other systems. However, granting editors the liberty to modify the template may lead to inconsistent or inadequate documentation. It is therefore essential that the process is overseen by the lead editor or peer reviewer. In summary, whereas standard collections management systems are data-entry systems in which conservators fill in pre-existing forms, wikis are primarily publishing systems that allow them to adapt templates to the specifics of each artwork, shaping the documentation in both content and form.

## The conservator as an editor

As mentioned above, standard museum information systems do not leave much room for variability and reduce artworks to fixed categories (van Saaze, 2013: 167). One consequence of this situation is that the number of forms and entries per artwork is so high that they have to be divided into numerous panels, sidebars, menus and screens. The resulting complexity prevents staff from consulting more than certain aspects and fragments of a given artwork at a time. This makes it difficult to understand changing artworks such as installations and performances. The descriptive fixity of systems leads to complex interfaces, which in turn prevent staff from operating at their level of proficiency. One reason for using a content management system to document complex works is to provide a more holistic view of the artworks. As the example of the SFMOMA Media Wiki shows, this can be achieved by bringing together relevant elements of an artwork's identity and iteration on a single wiki page.

Considering content management alongside collection management requires a rethinking of the conservator's role in documentation. I argue that the conservator documenting an artwork in this way is not so much entering data as doing the work of editing. The tradition of editing provides a useful framework for further conceptualising this aspect of conservation.

In her book proposing the development of a field of editing studies, Susan L. Greenberg (2018) broadens the definition of editing from its roots in book publishing to account for the variety of media, channels, and genres of publishing that exist today. Her understanding of editing as "a decision-making process, usually within the framework of a professional practice, that aims to select, shape and link texts, thereby placing them in a context that helps to convey the meaning and significance of the work to the reader" (2018: 14) is inclusive enough to span digital publishing. Traditionally, editing has referred to the work needed to prepare a text for publication, that is, to release it in print. However, in digital publishing, and particularly web publishing, "the line between before and after becomes permeable, and it is now common to see ex post acts referred to as editing" (2018: 117). Because of its website format, a wiki page is hardly ever finished.

Greenberg further describes the three key aspects of editing as "the choice of content (selection), the choice of language (shaping) and the overall context in which the content appears (linking)" (2018: 91). As described in the example of documenting Hans Haacke's installation *News* on the SFMOMA Media Wiki, the ensemble of conservator, curator and technical assistant followed similar lines. They selected content for most of the sections of the page from documentation accumulated in a variety of systems, including the systems for collections and digital asset management, file server, email server and the web. The key decision was to include the material that would be critical to the installation of the work in the future, and to make explicit assumptions and procedures that were otherwise taken for granted by current staff. Greenberg aptly notes that "[s]election involves decisions about what gets published and by whom [and] what to leave out as well as what to include" (2018: 16).

The 'editors' of *News* also had to adapt the template, deciding which of its sections to populate and which to leave blank for the time being or

to remove from the page altogether. They may have further shaped the page by making changes to headlines and the text itself. Greenberg describes shaping as concerning “everything [that has] to do with changes to the content itself at both macro level (developmental concerns such as structure, focus, tone and voice) and micro level of copy-editing (including grammar, spelling and usage)” (2018: 17). Finally, the embedding of the page within site-wide categories and the adjustment of the page layout correspond to Greenberg’s concept of linking, which adheres to “[t]he specific material conditions of its making and reception, and the way it is linked to other texts” (2018: 17).

Unlike large wikis such as Wikipedia, SFMOMA has not explicitly outlined its editing standards, leaving them as a process, although pages for larger works such as Julia Scher’s *Projective Engineering* have been highlighted as examples of best practice for editors. As a result, whether staff are writing or revising, they are already editing. The boundary between authors and editors is blurred, since a wikipage is a collaborative effort of all its contributors.

The authoring and editing practices that aim to convey the meaning and significance of a given work of art to its readers show that it is indeed treated as a publication, even if the wiki system it is part of is primarily intended for museum staff. After all, its potential readers include third parties interested in loans and even artists commissioned to design new installations for collected artworks (Frieling, 2014: 147-9). The practices of selection, shaping, and linking that were once the exclusive province of the professional editor are, in the case of the wiki, potentially practiced by any collaborator involved in documentation.

This chapter has explored how an implemented collections management system can be supported by another application, a content management system, in its mission to document changing works of art. Although still in an experimental phase, the relatively smooth embedding of the wiki into the conservation and documentation workflow at SFMOMA has been made possible by the combination of a conservator’s champion initiative and a positive interdepartmental collaborative environment, institutionalised in the form of an interdisciplinary team. I argued that the interdisciplinary model, as opposed to ‘departmental’

models, better equips the institution to adapt its digital information space to its changing needs.

While the wiki system is well suited to this purpose in many respects, I have identified a number of its critical limitations, such as the lack of nuanced file management, the need for users to become familiar with its structure and markup language, and its limited selective sharing capacity, which prevents collaboration beyond the walls of the institution. If an organisation is able to overcome these constraints, a wiki could be a relatively affordable means of meeting the documentation needs of media art, and potentially contemporary art in general.

I have also argued that the consequence of adapting a content management system to conservation and documentation workflows is that conservators and other staff take on the role of editors. Rather than the work of data entry, the creation of an artwork's digital dossier requires the shaping of documentation in both content and form. This process has parallels in the established procedures of editing, which involve making decisions about selection, shaping and linking.

The operation of content management systems in museums has largely been the domain of the 'digital' departments that run their websites. The people in these departments are the ones to turn to for collaboration. At the same time, documenting and editing artworks on a wiki can bring together the many voices of conservators, registrars, curators and technicians to articulate the contributions of their own professions to the meaning and significance of the works in their care. It also sheds new light on the oft-repeated statement that art installations only exist when they are installed. Compiling and editing relevant documentation not only better prepares us for their live episodes in galleries, but also helps us to treat them as present and alive in institutional memory.

## Chapter 3

### **Sharing knowledge in art conservation: from repository building to research publishing<sup>110</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

Contemporary art challenges standard notions and conduct in museums. Artworks such as installations, performances and media art appear in changing iterations and their meaning is often conveyed through their intangible aspects, their biography and tacit knowledge of the artist and the museum (Hummelen & Scholte, 2004: 208). Although collecting institutions have embraced contemporary art, they often lack adequate expertise and resources to care for it. The non-object-based nature of this art creates requirements on laborious testing of new methodologies and increased emphasis on documentation (Heydenreich, 2011; van de Vall, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Meeting the special requirements for its preservation and presentation (van Saaze, 2013) is further hindered by its generally secondary position to the more widely recognised older works. One remedy for organisations has been the pooling of resources for the development of new working methods and the co-production of documentation. Here, however, they face another obstacle.

Collecting institutions as a whole are reluctant to convey practical knowledge about works of art. This is mainly for their commitment to confidentiality set out in the museum code of ethics, but also for their prevailing attitude of concealment in preservation matters (ICOM, 2017: 42; Frasco, 2009: 85-92; van Saaze, 2011: 250-1; van Saaze, 2013: 20-4, 43;

110 This chapter is based on Barok, D. (2024). Sharing Knowledge in Art Conservation: From Repository Building to Research Publishing. In R. van de Vall & V. van Saaze (Eds.), *Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice*. Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-42357-4\_13

Scheidemann, 2016). As contemporary art enters collections, knowledge sharing between organisations is important for the development of a common frame of reference and the identification of best practices in an evolving field, but is hampered by ethical, legal and technical complexity. How to solve this problem? Is it possible to overcome the constraints on the distribution of knowledge and documentation between institutions? And if so, how to organise this exchange so that it is beneficial for preservation practice?

To answer these questions, in this chapter I study initiatives for the interinstitutional exchange of documentation and research materials on the conservation of contemporary art. I focus on an online database project set up by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) in a pioneering effort to share conservation documentation among experts in a semi-public setting. I place it in a historical context and identify a set of motifs that shaped its mission and form. My analysis of its use over time reveals a combination of factors that contributed to its eventual decline. The main success of the INCCA database appears to have been to provide access to the templates of forms and reports used in emerging practice and enable networking and intensify exchanges between members. My examination of INCCA's further efforts leads me to identify the network as a research-based initiative and recognise its role in consolidating the conservation of contemporary art as a field. I conclude that this shift has precipitated the diversion of knowledge exchange from the circulation of data in the network towards public oriented knowledge production.

## **Setting ground for sharing knowledge in contemporary art conservation**

Issues in modern and contemporary art conservation have been discussed among collecting institutions for several decades. An early, significant undertaking to establish a framework for cross-institutional collaboration was an international symposium organised by Heinz Althöfer in Düsseldorf in 1977. For fifteen years prior to the event, he had worked as a conservator at the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, which during that time had

acquired works by contemporary local artists such as the Zero Group and representatives of *Objektkunst* (Althöfer, 1977: 13). Althöfer organised the symposium shortly after his appointment as head of a newly established municipal scientific conservation laboratory, notable for its access to an X-ray machine that allowed for more nuanced examination of objects.<sup>111</sup> The aim was to align its work agenda with the needs of art museum collections in the wider geographical area and to establish a research programme on the restoration of modern and contemporary art (Caianiello, 2005: 41).<sup>112</sup> The idea was to discuss issues of modern art conservation in a small working group. The group eventually grew to 58 individuals who gathered at the symposium entitled *Restaurierung moderner Kunst* (1977), coming mainly from museums and organisations in West Germany, but also from Brussels, Amsterdam and Copenhagen and including the coordinator of ICOM's Working Group on 20th Century Paintings.<sup>113</sup>

Althöfer's 'Working Programme', written after the symposium as the opening essay for proceedings, does not deal exclusively with questions of painting, although they are in the majority. Attention is paid to other media and materials, as well as to the conservator's judgment. Althöfer concludes his article by listing problematic issues in the conservation of modern and contemporary art. One strand concerned the traditional problems of painting (badly cracked, multi-layered, large-format and monochrome paintings, and coloured canvases). Another area included non-traditional materials in collage and mixed media painting, as well as paper, photography, plastic and plexiglas, which had not received much attention in restoration despite their prevalence in post-war art. The programme also cited examples of 'ideological' issues where conservators are forced to take a personal stance, such as interfering with the natural decomposition of ephemeral materials like chocolate and fat (which

<sup>111</sup> The institution continues to exist today as the Restaurierungszentrums der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf/Schenkung Henkel. Since 2019, the centre is led by Joanna Phillips, formerly head of media conservation at Guggenheim Museum, New York.

<sup>112</sup> "Restaurierung moderner und zeitgenössischer Kunstoffekte" in the original German. Author's translation.

<sup>113</sup> The group was renamed the Modern and Contemporary Art Working Group by 1981 (Weiss & Stoner, 1981: 81/6/1-9).

Joseph Beuys, a teacher at the local academy, worked with), or the replaceability or reparability of motors in kinetic works (such as the lumino-kinetic objects of the ZERO group).

Thus, according to Althöfer, contemporary art as an object of conservation could be divided into three areas: objects that can be treated as traditional works of art; objects that raise new technical issues and require work with new materials and restoration techniques; and objects for which it is necessary to approach the restoration intervention ‘ideologically’ (Althöfer, 2002). The context of traditional conservation - preserving the original condition, assuming objectivity and treating change as damage - is relevant to the first group, but its usefulness is questionable for new materials, while it seems too one-sided, even inadequate, for ephemeral works.

All in all, the 1977 manifesto formulated theoretical problems of originality and authenticity in modern art as questions of conservation. At the end of the symposium, a working group was set up to follow up on the programme, although for the next two decades the activity of the Düsseldorf laboratory remained largely local.<sup>114</sup> The symposium did, however, direct conservators' attention on the changing nature of artworks and the need for interpretive judgement.

Another legacy of this early initiative was the recognition of the need for contact and collaboration between conservators and other professions, as well as an outline of how this might be achieved. In his Düsseldorf manifesto, Heinz Althöfer called for the intensification of contacts with artists, manufacturers, art historians, museum professionals, scientists and collectors (1977: 8). Following discussions at the symposium, Althöfer concluded that this would require “first, a collection of facts [about materials and methods] is required, followed by an exchange of facts,” and emphasized that “materials and methods should be investigated scientifically” (1977: 8).<sup>115</sup>

While collecting institutions continued to develop strategies for preserving changing artworks, it was much later that significant cross-

<sup>114</sup> Notably, between 1978-1981, the Restaurierungszentrum conducted a survey of 442 objects, and between 1979-1983, it collected 39 questionnaires from artists (Weyer & Heydenreich, 1999).

<sup>115</sup> Author's translation.

institutional partnerships began to emerge. Among the most influential were the Variable Media Network (2001-2004) and Matters in Media Art (2003-2015). Both were conceived as consortia of museums and archives aiming to develop best practice protocols for the collection and preservation of media art. While their efforts resulted in models and guidelines for the care of time-based media, they did not establish means for the exchange of documentation. The Variable Media Network published several short case studies that were intended to illustrate the hypotheses of the documentation model rather than serve as a platform for exchange (Depocas, et al., 2003: 70-114).

Efforts both to develop new conservation strategies and to create a platform for the sustained dissemination of knowledge and data found common ground in another major initiative, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA). The network is still active today and provides a compelling example of how the conservation of contemporary art has sought to reconcile collaboration and sharing with conservation ethics.

## **International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art**

INCCA has played a key role in catalysing cooperation between institutions that collect contemporary art. Since its inception in 1999, the initiative has organised three multi-year projects, two major conferences, a series of seminars, workshops and exhibitions, published two books, produced dozens of case studies, and initiated interest and regional networks. It now has over two thousand institutional and individual members worldwide. Members publish announcements on INCCA's online platform, which has become a go-to source of professional news from the field. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on one section of the platform, a conservation documentation database. I will explore the motivations for establishing this resource as a platform for circulating knowledge and data between organisations, how it has addressed confidentiality concerns, and the extent to which it has contributed to improving the care of contemporary art.

In the early 1990s, the Dutch Ministry of Culture launched an extraordinary project to improve the condition of public collections, known as the Delta Plan.<sup>116</sup> Its name referred to the previous Delta Plan, which had led to the construction of dikes in the south-west of the country after a catastrophic flood in the 1950s. The choice of urgent language had its reasons. The main impetus was a report on the alarming state of the state's museum collections, which were threatened by inadequate registration, major conservation and restoration backlogs and inadequate equipment.<sup>117</sup> The nuances of restoration were also the subject of wider public debate at the time. A widely publicised case was that of Barnett Newman's colour field painting *Who Is Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, which a visitor to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam had slashed in several places with a folding knife. The museum paid a considerable sum of money to a Newman expert in New York to restore it, but he repainted the damaged area and covered the canvas with two layers of varnish, damaging it even more.<sup>118</sup>

The Delta Plan, which ultimately lasted a decade and cost €150 million, was an unusually large rescue package for museums, even by international standards. At its heart was the care of the cultural heritage of the so-called Golden Age, in the care of the Rijksmuseum, but the museums of modern art also needed help. Another event triggered their coordinated action to improve the condition of their collections. At the Kröller-Müller Museum, fingerprints appeared on a mural by Sol LeWitt and the question arose as to what to do with the work. The curator felt that since it was a conceptual work that was actually a written form of instruction, it could be realised again. The conservator, however, argued that such an approach would be contrary to the ethical principles of conservation, in particular the rule of reversibility of intervention. As similar issues arose for other objects in the collection, the curator began to ask colleagues in other institutions whether they had faced similar problems in the past. A working group of curators and conservators from several museums of modern and contemporary art in the country was

<sup>116</sup> <https://catalogus.boekman.nl/pub/02-407.pdf>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>117</sup> <https://catalogus.boekman.nl/pub/p13-0300.pdf>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/02/style/IHT-roller-controversy-in-amsterdam-the-restoration-of-modern-art.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

formed in 1993. Together they identified a number of serious problems for the sustainability and development of their collections: the lack of criteria for making decisions about interventions in modern art, the acute shortage of modern art conservators and the professional requirements of the profession, and the need for research and exchange of knowledge about modern materials and artistic practices.

On this basis, fifteen Dutch museums and organisations formed the independent Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art (SBMK), which is still active today.<sup>119</sup> Its first initiative was to develop a conservation methodology that would take account of the complexity of modern art. In the process, it undertook practical research into the display of ten works from its collections, selected as examples of unresolved problems in terms of materials, ethics and aesthetics. These were objects and sculptures from Conceptualism, Kineticism and Arte Povera. The unconventional modern materials in these cases included synthetic (plastic, glass wool, foam rubber) and organic materials (wax, hay, herbs), as well as electrical and electromechanical devices (neon lights, a motor, a freezer). In order to present and discuss the results of the research, the Foundation decided to organise a symposium, for which it contacted international museums facing similar problems.

*Modern Art: Who Cares?* (1997) in Amsterdam was attended by 450 professionals (Marontate, 1997), mostly representatives of international collecting institutions and conservation studios (Hummelen & Sillé, 1999). In terms of size, it was the largest gathering on the conservation of art by living artists, comparable to general conferences of learned societies in established disciplines.<sup>120</sup> Representatives from major museums such as

119 <https://sbmk.nl/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

120 Six months after the symposium, the Getty Conservation Institute organised a conference explicitly dedicated to contemporary art. The three-day long *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art* attracted over 350 participants (Constantine 1998). It brought together “professionals from a range of disciplines—artists, museum directors, curators, conservators, art historians, dealers, collectors, and scientists, as well as a philosopher and a lawyer—to offer their individual perspectives on the intent of the artist, the effect of the art market, ways to cope with rapidly evolving media technologies, and fine art as popular culture” ([http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/public\\_programs/conferences/20thart.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/public_programs/conferences/20thart.html), accessed 16 October 2023).

the Tate, V&A, Guggenheim, National Gallery of Art, Stedelijk Museum, Van Abbemuseum, Pompidou and MUMOK were present.<sup>121</sup> It was hoped that increasing confidence and legitimacy in dealing with “non-traditional modern art objects” (Sillé, 1999: 14) could be achieved by creating new models of registration and decision-making and developing new terminology and workflows (Sillé, 1999; Berndes, 1999). One of the main themes of the discussions was the complexity of modern materials and the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about their composition in order to predict and possibly prevent degradation. In addition to objects and sculptures, installations and videos were also discussed. The importance of detailed documentation of the materials, appearance and function of the work at the time of acquisition was also discussed, including the makers' views on the importance of the materials and techniques used, as well as their attitudes towards the ageing process of the work. In addition, conservators appealed to curators to recognise that registration and conservation must play a key role in the acquisition of a work. The symposium thus built indirectly on the legacy of the Düsseldorf event of the 1970s.

Another aim of the event was to develop a common pool of resources and expertise among collecting institutions. One seminar was dedicated to the establishment of an international electronic network (Schinzel & Hummelen, 1999). The rapidly growing World Wide Web could improve communication and access to much needed information on artists' materials and techniques. Participants began to outline a website that would accommodate this exchange. It would also host discussions, profiles of professionals and other resources (Schinzel & Hummelen, 1999: 340).

The symposium organiser, the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN), took up these aims and, together with the Tate and nine other museums and organisations, prepared a multi-year project funded

<sup>121</sup> In addition to museums, participants came from research centres and universities such as the Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf, the Konservatorskolen Copenhagen, the University of Ghent and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Alongside conservators, the interdisciplinary setting gave a voice to academics and researchers, curators, scientists, museum directors and artists.

by the European Commission.<sup>122</sup> The newly established International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art created a website as the backbone of the initiative. When it went online in the early 2000s, it was a state-of-the-art resource for the new field. It included announcements, a bibliography, member profiles and, most importantly, a database of artists' archives for documentation, supported by its own thesaurus (Wharton, 2005: 174-5).

For the rest of the decade, INCCA's core activity was a series of European projects. These were pioneering examples of coordinated action between dozens of collecting institutions. Questions were asked about the practicalities of restaging works, as well as more general issues such as methodology. The results were made available to members in the form of metadata in the INCCA database, dossiers on dedicated websites and articles. There wasn't, and still isn't, a journal dedicated to this area of research.<sup>123</sup> However, INCCA's collaborative, practical and organised approach to the study of works and issues has helped to professionalise conservation research and to establish the field in the academia. The scientific aspect of INCCA was supported by the continued presence of universities and research organisations among the partners.<sup>124</sup>

122 The founding consortium also included Guggenheim Museum, SMAK Ghent, MUMOK Vienna, SBMK (Netherlands), Restaurierungszentrum der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, Konservatorskolen Copenhagen, La Caixa Foundation (Barcelona), Galeria d'Arte Moderna in Turin and Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

123 Art conservation journals include *Studies in Conservation*, published by the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) in London since 1952; *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, published by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) since 1960; *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, published by ICON in London since 1977; *Conservation Journal*, published by the V&A Museum in London since 1991; *Technè*, published in Paris since 1994; and *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, published by the Institute of Archaeology of UCL London since 1996.

124 On average, they made up a third of the 16 to 30 partners per project.

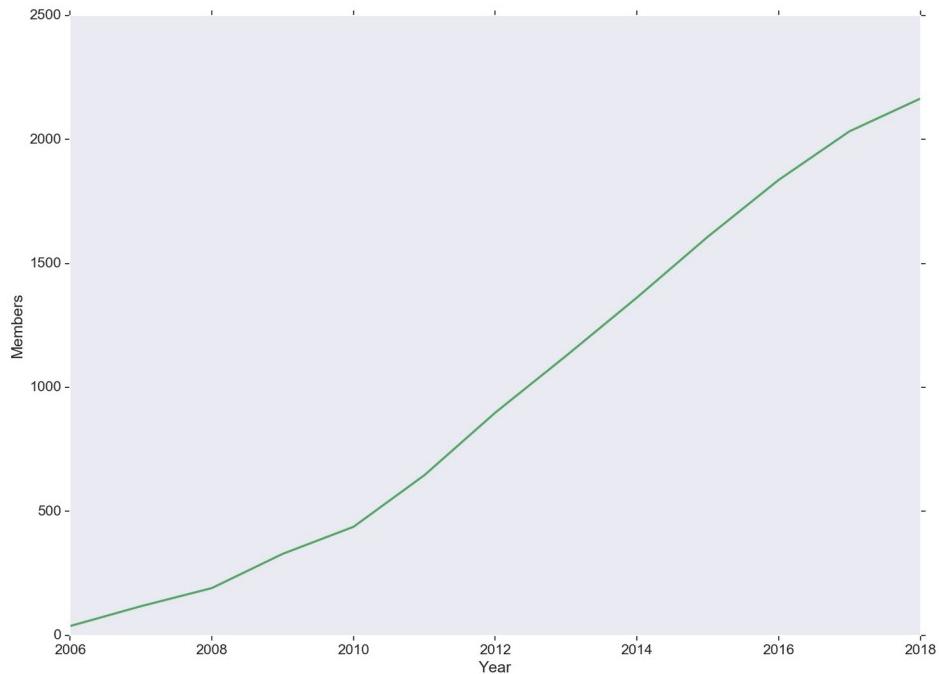


Figure 11. Number of members of INCCA.<sup>125</sup>

INCCA continues to play a key role in the conservation of contemporary art. Technically, it is not a legal entity, but a long-term activity of the Dutch governmental agency for cultural heritage (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, RCE), coordinated by one of its employees.<sup>126</sup> It has a steering committee, bylaws and counts a steadily growing number of members worldwide (more than 2,200 in 2019, see Figure 11).

125 This and all graphs in this paper are the result of my analysis of snapshots of membership and document data from the [incca.org](http://incca.org) website, taken on 15 October 2018. The snapshots were created by scraping the website, as the data could not be exported directly.

126 The INCCA initiator ICN has became part of RCE in 2011. The network coordinator Karen Te Brake-Baldock holds the post of “(inter)nationale kennisnetwerken” in the department “Rijkserfgoedlaboratorium” (National Laboratory). Tatja Scholte previously held this position from 1999 to 2007 (Learner, 2014).

## INCCA database

Figure 12. The INCCA database section of INCCA online platform, 2019.<sup>127</sup>

Today, the INCCA database forms the ‘Member documents’ section of the more extensive INCCA’s online platform (Figure 12). The main section of the platform is now also populated by member contributions, which are publicly accessible and include announcements of events and publications, as well as various news from the field.

<sup>127</sup> Screenshot taken from [https://www.incca.org/search?search\\_api\\_multi\\_fulltext=&node\\_field\\_free\\_tagging\[0\]=6344&page=19](https://www.incca.org/search?search_api_multi_fulltext=&node_field_free_tagging[0]=6344&page=19), accessed 16 October 2023.

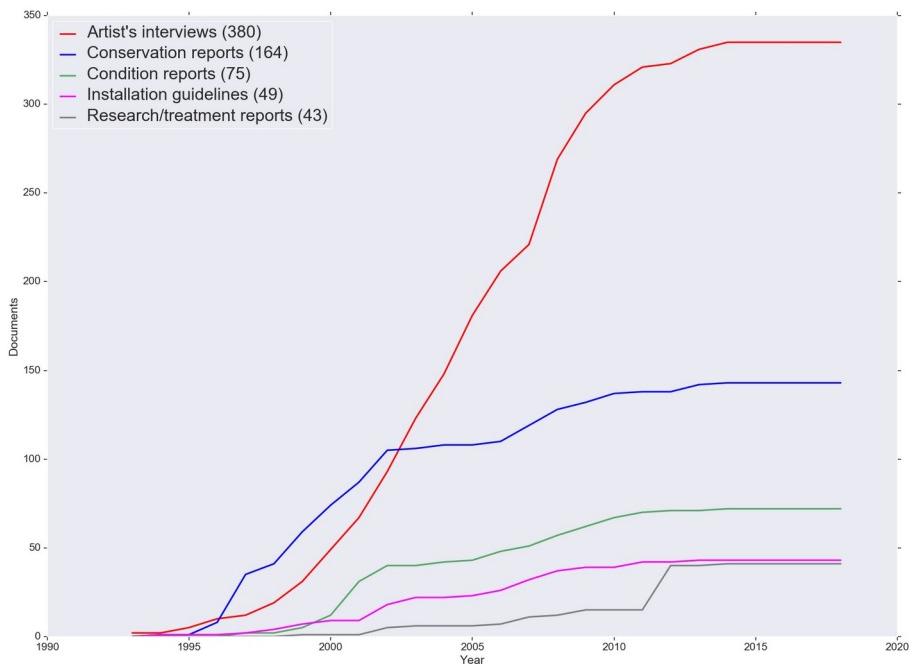


Figure 13. Number of documents in the INCCA database per type (five largest shown).<sup>128</sup>

The database contains references to 1,100 documents held by more than 90 organisations. An analysis of the entries by type of document shows that interviews with artists now make up the bulk of the content, about a third (Figure 13). This is despite the fact that they are only one form of recorded exchange with artists. Other forms are marginal. For example, questionnaires make up only 4%, artist statements 2% and correspondence less than 1%. One reason for this may be that their inclusion was not explicitly encouraged. In the case of correspondence, it is also a much less portable and more ephemeral form of documentation. Interviews in the INCCA database also outnumber other, more traditional forms of museum documentation such as conservation reports, condition reports, installation guidelines and treatment reports. How can this

<sup>128</sup> This graph does not represent the time when each document was added to the database; this information was not available for the analysis. Rather, it represents the time at which the documents were originally created.

preference for sharing interviews be explained? Why was it perceived as beneficial to preservation practice?

In its mission to advance art conservation through research and documentation, INCCA echoed the call for research and exchange of information on materials and methods made at the Düsseldorf Conference two decades earlier (Althöfer, 1977: 8).<sup>129</sup> As I will argue, Althöfer's emphasis on scientific investigation was taken up in INCCA through increasing association with academia. But more importantly than the *facts per se*, the founders of INCCA placed *the artist* at the centre. The artist's opinion was not only considered relevant in weighing options for material treatment, but was also recognised as crucial in preserving the (conceptual) identity, as opposed to the condition, of the artwork.

Laurenson (2006) defines the concept of the work's identity as that which "describes everything that must be preserved in order to avoid the loss of something of value in the work of art." This shift in focus reflected the changing direction of conversations in the field of art conservation in the 1990s in relation to the iterativity of the artwork. Artist interviews would record the artist's opinion and the process of weighing possible options with the conservator, gradually articulating the artist's intention. Prior to this, artists were rarely involved in conservation. In fact, museums rarely took a systematic approach, nor did they create registers for future reference (Weiss & Stoner, 1981). For this reason, the INCCA network prioritised interviews as the main research material from the outset, when it set out its priorities as establishing "the relevant joint international guidelines" for artist interviews, conducting them in order to "collect information direct[ly] from the artist" and creating a common register for them.<sup>130</sup>

However, museums collect information from artists under the condition of confidentiality, which is one of the guiding principles of

<sup>129</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>130</sup> [http://web.archive.org/web/20010427223513/http://cecor.eba.ufmg.br/icom-cc/index/organiz/H PAGEWG/newsletters/NEWSLETTER\\_p1\\_2.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20010427223513/http://cecor.eba.ufmg.br/icom-cc/index/organiz/H PAGEWG/newsletters/NEWSLETTER_p1_2.htm), <http://web.archive.org/web/20010715045257/http://www.icn.nl:80/engels/6.2.html>, both accessed 16 October 2023. Later, its twofold aim was reframed more broadly as to "collect primary source information from artists' archives or artists and their representatives" and to share knowledge and (especially unpublished) information for conservation purposes (Hummelen & Scholte, 2012).

museum practice and conservation. In its Code of Ethics, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) requires museum professionals to “protect confidential information obtained during their work” and to remember that “information about items brought to the museum for identification is confidential and should not be published or passed to any other institution or person without specific authorisation from the owner” (ICOM, 2017: 42).<sup>131</sup> Collecting institutions are therefore obliged to protect documentation from the public, as it contains sensitive details. In order to balance professional ethical standards and the demand for a cross-institutional resource, the founding members of INCCA decided to limit the content of the database to metadata rather than full documents and to restrict access to members.<sup>132</sup>

As a result, the database provided members with a catalogue of records for materials they could request from individual contributors. This is in contrast to the rest of the online platform, which is open to the public without restriction. Initially limited to the initiators of the network, membership was soon extended to professionals and researchers from across the field. While it offered benefits such as the creation of public profiles, the most important factor in expanding the membership base, according to a user survey, was direct access to unpublished research and information in the database (Brake-Baldock, 2009).<sup>133</sup> More specifically, over two-thirds of respondents said that they searched the content several times a year to use existing interviews and questionnaires for research and as tools for their own organisations (Brake-Baldock, 2009). This confirms that artist interviews have indeed been the driving force behind the operation of the INCCA database.

<sup>131</sup> The principle has been also adopted by national conservation institutes. For example, see the code of ethics of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), point 7, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/code-of-ethics>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Tatja Scholte, in-person interview, 23 April 2019.

<sup>133</sup> In 2009 survey, 29 out of 40 respondents considered it important, unlike 5 who thought otherwise.

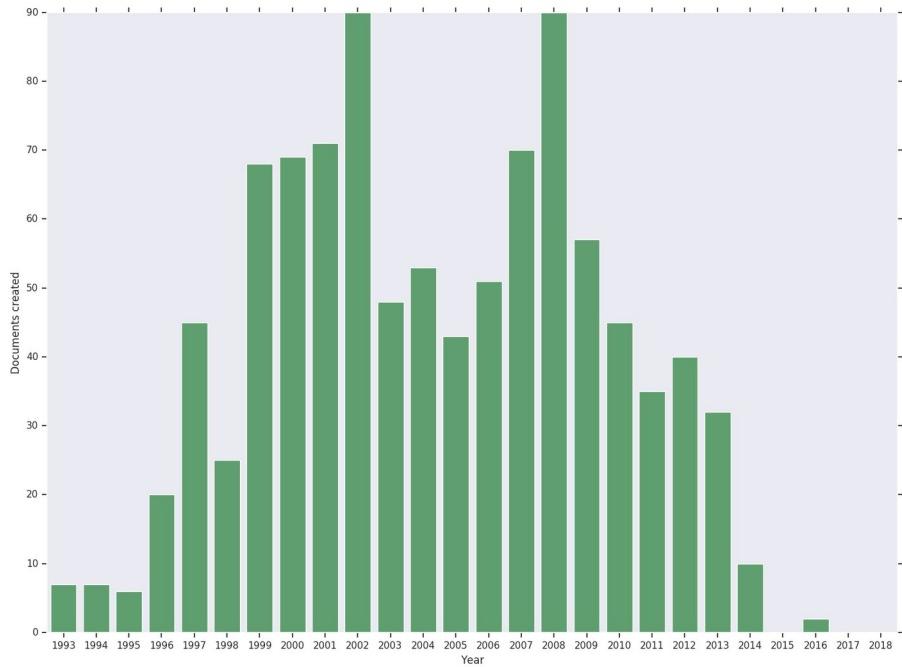


Figure 14. Number of records in the INCCA database per year of creation.

However, despite the increasing importance of documentation for the preservation of art, contributions have fallen sharply (Figure 14). How can this be explained? In what follows, I suggest several factors that may be responsible. I will also address the question of whether this also means that improving the care of contemporary art by maintaining a cross-institutional resource for documentation is no longer viable.

### The impact of cultural policies on INCCA's changing forms of collaboration

The analysis of the annual contributions to the INCCA database shows that the vast majority of documents were produced between 1999 and 2011. This period corresponds to the duration of INCCA's main research projects. While INCCA's pilot project (1999-2002) focused on conducting interviews with artists, producing guidelines and developing an online database for their registration along with other documentation (Hummelen, et al., 1999; INCCA, 2002; Hummelen & Scholte, 2004: 210-2),

this was followed by Inside Installations (2004-2007), which kept the focus on the artist as the primary source of information, but narrowed it down from studying the intent of each work to case studies of selected works. Here, the participating organisations investigated and documented over thirty complex installations from their collections, the process of which was presented and analysed in three exhibitions, a scholarly online publication and a book published by an academic press (Hummelen & Scholte, 2006: 8-9; Scholte & 't Hoen, 2007; Scholte, et al., 2007; Scholte & Wharton, 2011).<sup>134</sup>

INCCA's third and last major research initiative was called PRACTICs (short for 'Practices, Research, Access, Collaboration, Teaching In Conservation of Contemporary Art', 2009-2011). It focused on the profession of conservation itself, exploring ways in which it can be taught and communicated to the public. Rather than documenting artworks, participants produced a documentary film, seminars and two major symposia, and initiated long-term working groups on education and selected geographic regions (McCoy, 2010).<sup>135</sup>

Taking the three projects together, over the course of a decade we can observe a gradual transition of emphasis from building professional information commons, through collaborative knowledge production and publication, to public dialogue and discussion (Table 1). With these developments, the role of non-public databases receded into the background.

Does this mean that museums no longer need to exchange data and knowledge to improve the care of contemporary art? I will argue that the answer to this question is deeply conditioned by the changing conditions of international cultural heritage cooperation in Europe, where the majority of INCCA members operate. The relevance of studying the impact of funding on the conservation of contemporary art has been

134 The Inside Installations book was eventually published in 2011, as part of the next project PRACTICs.

135 <http://web.archive.org/web/20140721035055/http://www.incca.org/practices>, accessed 16 October 2023.

recognised previously (van Saaze, 2011: 251), and the following analysis takes a step in this direction.

Project	Duration	Main focus	Key method	Documentation sharing	Main outcomes
INCCA	1999-2002	Artist	Interview	Metadata (members only database)	Online platform, Database
Inside Installations	2004-2007	Artwork (Installation art)	Case study	Articles, Documents	Online knowledge base, Exhibitions
PRACTICs, Access2CA	2009-2011	Conservation community, Public	Dialogue, Discussion	-	Symposia, Book, <sup>136</sup> Film, Working groups

Table 1. Focus shift in INCCA projects

INCCA's core activities were made possible through cultural funding from the European Union (EU). In fact, the creation of INCCA in the late 1990s coincided with an extension of the EU's cultural policy to include movable heritage. The EU's main mandate in this area was to promote networking and partnerships. The repositioning of cultural heritage funding not only enabled INCCA to facilitate an international programme, but also had a direct impact on its methods of knowledge production and exchange.

The EU's predecessor, the European Communities (EC), first introduced funding for cultural heritage in the early 1980s. Scholars in critical heritage studies have identified several factors responsible for this. At a time of energy crises and unfolding economic recession, the EC was experiencing a crisis of political legitimacy. This context prepared the ground for "the idea that monuments and sites could act as a remedy, tying citizens together" (Niklasson, 2017: 142). By this time, it was

<sup>136</sup> The main symposium, *Contemporary Art: Who Cares?*, as well as the book produced in the framework of PRACTICs feature results of the previous project, Inside Installations.

accepted that social integration would not come about merely as a by-product of economic integration (Shore, 2000: 18). Other reasons included Italy's constant demand for funding for its cultural heritage, Greece's accession to the EC, the will to counterbalance American and Japanese cultural authority, and the desire to participate in the international movement for heritage protection (Niklasson, 2016). The European Historical Monuments and Sites Fund (EHMF) was established to support the reconstruction of monumental heritage sites associated with nation-states. In practice, the programme primarily supported the restoration of archaeological sites of 'European significance', with the Parthenon and the Acropolis as flagship projects (Niklasson, 2016: 18, 90-1).<sup>137</sup>

In the next decade, following the Maastricht Treaty (EC, 1992), the political climate was different. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall activated the process of eastward enlargement. The end of the Warsaw Pact marked the emergence of a multipolar world in which the role of the new Europe was uncertain. In the EU, identity politics took precedence, soon manifested in the introduction of the EU flag, anthem and exchange study programmes. This coincided with a change in attitude towards cultural heritage. The economic value of culture had always been essential to the Commission, where heritage sites were seen as drivers of tourism. But the policy of prioritising monumental sites, emblematic of nation states' myths of origin, was sidelined in the climate of integration. They could no longer be trusted alone to convey the testimony of Europe's past (Niklasson, 2017: 146-7).

In 1997, the European Commission launched a Union-wide action programme in the field of cultural heritage, Raphael.<sup>138</sup> The Commission made networking and partnerships one of its main areas of support.<sup>139</sup>

137 While the EHMF distributed 42.7 million ECU for restoration activities in 459 projects, the financial support for the Parthenon and Acropolis alone amounted to 5.5 million ECU (Niklasson, 2016: 90-1).

138 Along with the programmes for 'contemporary creation' and books and reading, called Kaleidoscope 2000 and Ariane, respectively (GRRP4, 2015: 8).

139 The programme was divided into five areas, with international networking and partnerships running through all of them. The areas were 'Networks and partnerships' (roughly: thematic networks, cooperation between museums and research institutes, research publications), 'Cooperation with third countries and international organizations' (World Heritage List sites preservation, comparative research),

Projects involving participants from several countries were more likely to be supported. As it happened, both Modern Art: Who Cares and INCCA were part of the first generation of international heritage actions financed under this programme. It was natural to seek funding for an international initiative in contemporary art conservation from the EU's new cultural heritage programme, as there was no precedent or comparable alternative. The flagship of the nascent INCCA became an online database, pioneering new means of cooperation in the field of cultural heritage.

Programme	Period	Priority	Goal	Supported project
Raphael	1997-1999	Professional networks & partnerships	European integration	INCCA
Culture 2000	2000-2006	Research projects, “laboratories”	European identity	Inside Installations
Culture 2007	2007-2013	Circulation (of workers & works), dialogue	European citizenship	PRACTICs/ Access2CA
Creative Europe	2014-2020	Networks & platforms	Creative innovation	

Table 2. The impact of European cultural policy on INCCA research design<sup>140</sup>

The subsequent framework, Culture 2000, merged the EU's three cultural funding programmes and, in terms of heritage, prioritised the so-called ‘Cultural Heritage Laboratories’. Here, cultural heritage became a “vehicle of cultural identity” rather than an instrument of integration (Niklasson, 2017: 148). It was in this context that the INCCA network received financial support for more scholarly oriented, case-based research into preserving installation art in Inside Installation (2004-2007). Consequently, the priority in cultural funding in the Culture 2007 scheme shifted towards fostering the development of European citizenship,

‘Development and promotion of the cultural heritage in Europe’ (preservation and management of sites, laboratory research), ‘Access to heritage’ (commemorative events, multilingualism, digital access points), and ‘Innovation, further training and professional mobility’ (research, conferences, exchange programmes, ICT training). See European Community, 1995: 4.

140 Based on European Commission, 2017, and Niklasson, 2017.

encouraging cross-border mobility of cultural operators and works of art, and promoting intercultural dialogue. The public-oriented PRACTICs were supported under this scheme.

In retrospect, it is evident that the changing cultural policies of the European Union have shaped the objectives and methods of INCCA projects (Table 1), as can be seen in the network's shift in focus from information gathering through knowledge production to presentation (Table 2). The funding scheme has been revised several times over the last twenty years, largely in line with changes in the way culture has been instrumentalised to meet EU political and economic priorities. While in the 1990s the EU saw culture as a vessel for integration, the Creative Europe programme (2014-2020) framed culture as a catalyst for creativity, growth and employment, and saw it as a driver of competitiveness on the world stage. Indeed, the EU's support for cultural heritage gradually shifted from professional networks to creative platforms. At this point, however, INCCA stopped seeking financial support as a cultural heritage project and instead aligned itself with academic initiatives funded by the EU's Research and Development programme.

The structural dependence of INCCA's core activities on changing EU policies explains why maintaining an online catalogue of documentation was only seen as a viable way of sharing expertise in the early stages, leading to its eventual withdrawal. But this is not the only factor.

## **From building repository to research publishing**

In setting up the INCCA database, the project group discussed at length whether to include full documents or just metadata, what the structure should be and what system should be used.<sup>141</sup> It was clear, though, that whatever information was to be shared, access should be restricted to members.

Within a few years the situation changed somewhat. The sensitivity of conservation information about art objects had become more nuanced when it was agreed that documentation of case studies in the Inside Installations project would be published online without restriction.

141 Tatja Scholte, in-person interview, 6 July 2017.

However, instead of creating a new public section within the existing INCCA database, the project group decided to create a new website for this purpose. One reason for this was that the structure of the existing site proved too restrictive. For example, information did not always come from an artist, but often from other stakeholders, including artists' studios, foundations and galleries. More importantly, the documentation of contemporary artworks is not limited to self-contained individual files, but typically includes multi-layered and interdependent elements such as interview recordings, transcriptions and notes, threads of email communication, and data and multimedia supporting condition reports.

This is illustrated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's processual work *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), selected for a case study in Inside Installation. The work revolves around a virtual manga character brought to life by 18 different invited artists who featured it in paintings, videos, wallpaper, music and various objects. The works were shown separately on different occasions and finally brought together in a touring exhibition that ended at the Van Abbemuseum, where it was acquired in its entirety for the collection (van Saaze, 2013). The exhibition was stage-managed by Huyghe and Parreno and later shown in a different version at other venues. The museum, however, was still not prepared to display the work without assistance of the artists.<sup>142</sup>

For this reason, as part of the INCCA project, the museum's curator and head of collections, Christiane Berndes, decided to re-create the exhibition, but in different formats, and to ask Huyghe and Parreno for their reactions. The process involved a series of new 'instalments' in different locations. On this occasion, the researcher conducted meetings and exchanged emails with the work's stakeholders. The case study's dossier on the Inside Installation website provides a narrative account of the staging of each iteration and contextual documentation, including the 'Artists interviews' section with an inventory of five meeting reports and email correspondence with the artists' assistants and three artist

142 [http://web.archive.org/web/20071021093447/http://www.inside-installations.org/artworks/detail.php?r\\_id=378&ct=research](http://web.archive.org/web/20071021093447/http://www.inside-installations.org/artworks/detail.php?r_id=378&ct=research), accessed 16 October 2023.

contributors (Figure 15).<sup>143</sup> Like other dossiers on the website, its layout had to be adapted to document this specific artwork.

The screenshot shows a website layout for 'inside installations'. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for 'project', 'artists', 'artworks' (which is the active tab), 'research', 'partners & contact', and a search bar. Below the navigation is a sidebar with sections for 'artist', 'artwork', and 'case research', each listing numbered items. The main content area features a large image of a manga-style character with purple hair and a yellow background. To the right of the image is a detailed description of the artwork:

**No Ghost Just a Shell (1999-2002)**  
*Huyghe, Pierre  
Parreno, Philippe*  
*collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven*

In 2002 the Van Abbemuseum made a special purchase in the form of an exhibition of 28 works by 18 different artists as part of the project 'No Ghost Just a Shell'. Central to this project was a virtual figure made for the multi-million dollar Japanese manga animation industry, in which these kinds of figures and characters are 'consumed' in large numbers. In 1999 the French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno bought the rights to this figure. They gave her the name 'AnnLee' and allowed her to tell her own life story. She was given a voice, a 3D form, a memory, a history and an identity. Huyghe and Parreno then invited various other artists to use AnnLee in their own work and to fill the empty shell with storylines and ideas – free of copyright. They also conceived of a way of producing relatively cheap 3D animations on video, which several artists made use of.

As well as in animation, AnnLee popped up in posters, paintings, objects, an installation, a magazine, a sound work and a book. In all of these she relates her own history – how, following an unremarkable role in a manga comic strip, she was doomed to disappear for good, but was spared this fate by being sold for 46000 yen and given a form, voice and a history. She tells how she gained an identity and experienced adventures. She reads aloud from a book or meets her own image. She is given her own magazine, playthings and soundtrack. Each work forms a chapter from her history. By giving her a coffin, she is also given the possibility to die. In 2002 Huyghe and Parreno concluded the project by transferring the copyrights to AnnLee herself. This means she owns her own identity thus making it impossible to exploit her anymore.

dimensions variable

Below the main content, there are sections for 'exhibition history', 'interview', 'external links', and 'download', each with a list of links.

Figure 15. *No Ghost Just a Shell* on the Inside Installations website.<sup>144</sup>

143 <https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/artworks/artwork.356.interview.html>, accessed 16 October 2023. In addition, the dossier contains a bibliography of writings by and about Parreno, including those related to the work (<https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/OCMT/mydocs/pp%20hov%20bibliography.pdf>, accessed 16 October 2023). For a detailed analysis of the work's 'career' in the museum, see Van Saaze, 2013: 143-80.

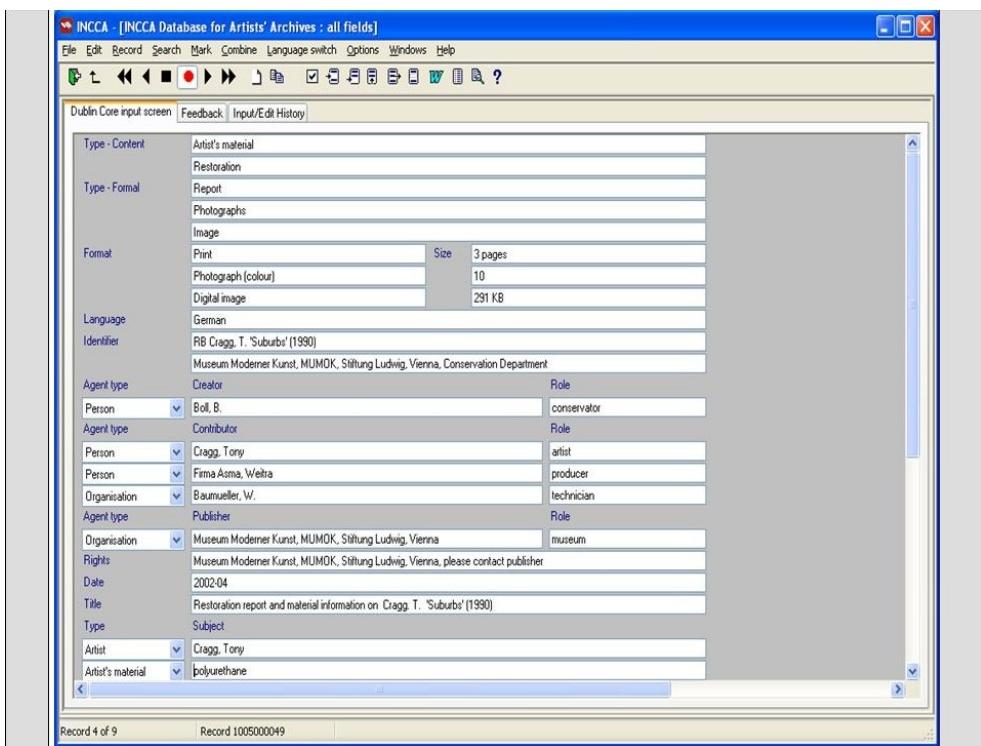


Figure 16. Section of INCCA database editor, 2004.

The database format can be useful for describing documents according to complex categories that facilitate their identification, especially when the content of the documents themselves is not included. This was the case with the INCCA database (Figure 16). However, even in modern database systems, it would be difficult to extract this complex descriptive information automatically and it would have to be entered manually, which is a time-consuming process. It is also difficult to capture the multi-layered relationships between documents in tabular form. The database is not flexible enough to accommodate the descriptive nuances and relationships between documents. Similar challenges are well known from the operation of collections management systems designed to handle object-based works (van Saaze, 2013). A more common practice is to store the breadth of documentation in complex folder structures on an intranet. This has influenced the way in which *No Ghost Just a Shell* and other works are presented on the Inside Installation website.

144 Screenshot taken from

<https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/artworks/artwork.356.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

Another factor in the decline of the INCCA database is that reports and other documents have a structure and language specific to an institution, as they are not intended for external use. Considerable effort is required to make the content and structure of conservation records readable to third parties. This was confirmed in the INCCA user survey, where the main reason cited for members not contributing was that “the documentation [is not] organised enough for distribution to colleagues” (Brake-Baldock, 2009). In addition, some documents have since become inaccessible due to staff changes, confidentiality or technical reasons.

We can also see that the field of contemporary art conservation has changed considerably over the years. Specialisations have emerged in time-based media, software-based art, performance, biological materials, plastics and other sub-fields. Document and material types have diversified rapidly and the metadata sharing approach may prove inadequate for works of art consisting of time-based media and datasets. These areas need to identify and develop their points of contact in different ways, rather than through a universal registry.

No less important, the network seems to have established itself as a field. With the growing demand for contemporary art conservators, specialised training opportunities continue to expand, while professional and academic events have proliferated.<sup>145</sup> Practitioners and researchers may feel less like members of a club and more like colleagues with a shared sense of practice, reference and solidarity. At the same time, much of the exchange has moved to informal channels and social media.

The combination of these factors explains the declining relevance of sharing conservation documentation through an inter-institutional reference catalogue. It is also indicative of wider changes in the way knowledge and information are shared in the field. My examination of INCCA’s collaborative efforts following its pivotal database project shows that public-oriented knowledge production and alignment with the academic community have been central to this shift.

The operation of a shared digital infrastructure is one way of creating the space for international and interdisciplinary collaboration

<sup>145</sup> See <https://monoskop.org/Art/Care#Events> (accessed 16 October 2023) for an overview of contemporary art conservation symposia, conferences, workshops and seminars.

needed to improve skills in the conservation of contemporary art. In the late 1990s, a group of conservators, curators and researchers representing a number of collecting institutions came together to form a network, INCCA, to address these needs. Their starting point was the recognition that in order to preserve works of art, it was necessary to bring artists and stakeholders together with conservators and curators. The new initiative designed targeted and practical research, bringing together practitioners (museum professionals) and researchers (research centres, universities). They set up a database to collect references to research materials and documentation and make them available to participants and others in need. However, after a number of large projects, the sharing activity declined sharply and the relevance of the model could no longer be taken for granted.

I have identified a number of phenomena that hinder the continued relevance of online repositories for knowledge sharing in art conservation. At a practical level, the content and structure of conservation documentation is rarely legible to third parties, and the tabular database is often not flexible enough to accommodate descriptive nuances and relations between documents. At a structural level, the focus of EU cultural funding policy has shifted from supporting networking to supporting the creative industries, where competitiveness rather than care has been promoted. In addition, over the last few decades, contemporary art conservation has become an established field, collegial, with much of the exchange taking place through informal channels and social media. And as it has become more diverse and specialised, the need for a single resource for the whole field is not as strong.

Key to this is INCCA's identity as a research-based initiative. What was once a progressive approach to tackling practical problems by conducting research and disseminating the results has now become the norm. Institutions no longer need to rely on an umbrella organisation to initiate collaborative research, nor on a central platform to amplify research results. Rather, its potential lies in facilitating communication and contacts in what can be called networked scholarship. Quan-Haase, Suarez and Brown note that "networked scholarship can entail exchange of information, insights, and advice across geographic and disciplinary boundaries within connected networks focused on thematic research

questions” (2014: 14). The ‘News & Events’ section featured on the home page of the INCCA platform could provide a basis for network development in this direction.

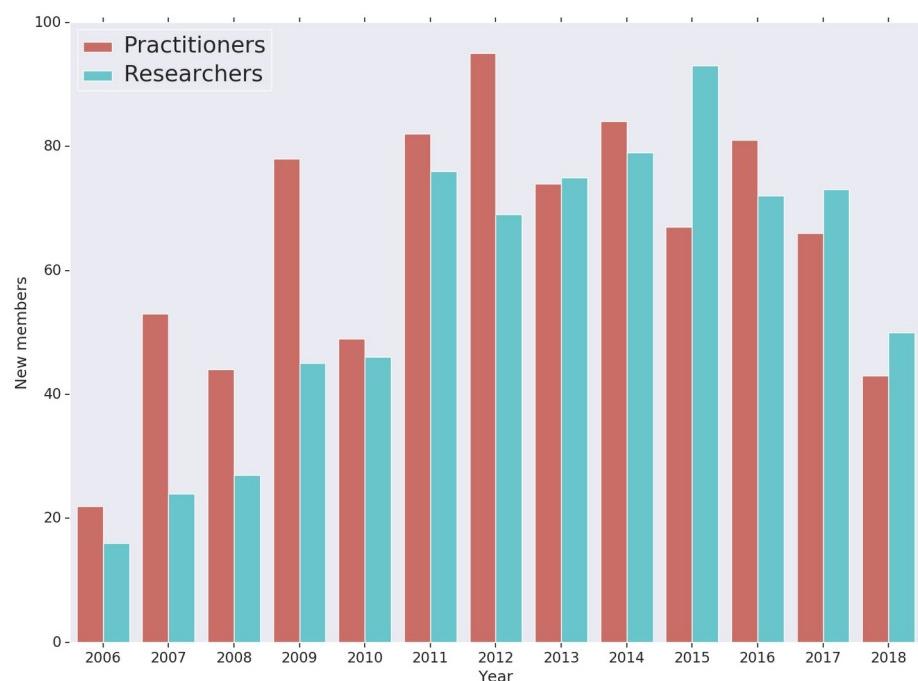


Figure 17. Professional affiliations of new members of INCCA annually.

Further support is provided by the changing structure of INCCA's membership base, but also in the wider field of art conservation. As my analysis shows, while the base was originally made up mainly of practitioners, by 2010 the number of professional researchers had equalled the annual number of new members (Figure 17). In a broader sense, the proliferation of scholarly research has led to the professionalisation of conservation research, as evidenced by the number of major academic-led research initiatives in recent years.<sup>146</sup> I have argued that this has reduced the relevance and appeal of providing access to

146 For example New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NewS, 2009-2013), Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research (NeCCAR, 2012-2015), New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA, 2015-2019), Cultures of Conservation (2017-2022), Conservation of Art in Public Spaces (CAPuS, 2018-2020) and Documenting Digital Art (2019-2022).

conservation documentation as a means of sharing knowledge in favour of scholarly and research publishing.

Publications are not limited to articles, proceedings and monographs, but extend to knowledge bases and research catalogues, as exemplified by the website for INCCA's Inside Installation discussed above. More recent examples include the Rauschenberg Research Project of SFMOMA and the Rauschenberg Foundation, and the Artist Archive Initiative of New York University, which interestingly began as an archive rather than a museum collection.<sup>147</sup> Although these open access research catalogues contain a great deal of data and information, they are primarily article-based, providing a narrative interpretation of the findings on a case-by-case basis for each work of art included. This approach shifts the focus from the dissemination of documents as such to their use as archival material to support the narration. This not only solves problems of legibility, but also leaves room for sensitive details to be cleared for publication. It also offers more flexibility in organising content than a tabular database. Finally, scholarly research brings more funding opportunities than the creation of repositories.

This shift can also be seen in the redesign of the INCCA website.<sup>148</sup> Launched in 2016, the new layout prominently features announcements of new books, articles, conference videos and other publications, many of which are available in open access.<sup>149</sup>

By adopting a policy of open access to collection information, museums are proclaiming openness as a means of ensuring their social function.<sup>150</sup> The trajectory of INCCA can be read in parallel with this call. Starting with the sharing of documentation metadata through a common protected online resource, the participating museums eventually embraced openness by another means: publishing.

<sup>147</sup> See <https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/>, <https://www.sfmoma.org/rauschenberg-research-project/> and <http://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/Initiative/>, respectively, all accessed 16 October 2023. The Artist Archives is currently dedicated to the work of David Wojnarowicz and Joan Jonas.

<sup>148</sup> <https://www.icom-cc-publications-online.org/PublicationDetail.aspx?cid=2dda0cee-e806-45e1-b75b-0e64e76df257>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>149</sup> <https://incca.org/updates>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.artnome.com/news/2019/4/29/solving-arts-data-problem-part-one-museums>, accessed 16 October 2023.



## Chapter 4

### Publishing as an art conservation strategy<sup>151</sup>

#### Introduction

The previous chapter showed that several factors have a direct impact on the feasibility of an online knowledge sharing platform: the complexity and illegibility of documentation for third parties, the rigidity of tabular databases, the familiarity and differentiation of the field, and changing funding agendas. In this chapter I discuss in more detail how these challenges have been addressed by various initiatives in recent years.

In particular, I focus on publishing as a distinctive approach to the preservation of art objects. It draws on practices associated with the conservation of changing artworks, which rely on thorough documentation and interdisciplinary collaboration. I distinguish between approaches aimed primarily at professionals within collecting institutions and those aimed at the public, foregrounding the interrelationship between preservation and presentation.

Bhaskar (2013, 2014) describes the publishing process in terms of a number of processes, including filtering, modelling, framing and amplification. In an era of content abundance, Bhaskar argues, publishers filter content not only to make it available, but also to make it noteworthy. They filter according to models that help them create value while managing costs. These models take into account not only economic but also non-financial factors such as political, aesthetic, religious and social concerns. At the same time, with the introduction of digital elements such as code, servers and screens, the concept of publishing has expanded

<sup>151</sup> This chapter is based on Barok, D. (2020). Taktická kanonizácia a procesné uchovávanie: pokusy o oddelenie uchovávania od vlastníctva a stien inštitúcie. *Flash Art CZ/SK*, (58), 46-49. Prague.

beyond the distribution of containers of content to include subjective aspects. Framing involves the deliberate use of publisher branding, design signals and messaging to shape how content is experienced. Frames serve as mediating mechanisms that shape both the expression and reception of content. This process also involves amplification - attracting attention and extending exposure or value. Amplification distinguishes publishing from content creation. In the digital space, framing is essential to amplification.

The cases are offered by two projects: Net Art Anthology, an online retrospective of net-based works created by the New York-based Rhizome between 2016 and 2019, and Digital Canon, an Net Art online catalogue of historical digital artworks from the Netherlands, launched by LIMA in Amsterdam in 2019. Both are not limited to a single artist or collection, and are therefore well suited to illustrate the issues at stake in terms of the distributed agencies surrounding the works in question. A comparative analysis of these platforms shows the possibilities and choices made to facilitate the presentation of artworks with the participation of stakeholders. While their respective focus on net art and digital art lends itself well to web publishing, I also discuss projects dealing with installations and other art forms that employ publishing as a conservation strategy.

As a conservation strategy, I frame publishing as a form of processual conservation, where the aim of conservation is to support the continuation of the work by transferring the necessary skills, procedures and information to those involved (van de Vall, 2015). This approach relies on the sharing of documentation that interprets aspects of an artwork, resulting in a multiplicity of documents, as described in Chapter 3. However, rather than simply publishing documentation, this approach also involves assembling and editing these documents into coherent multimedia content, relying on the conservator as editor (introduced in Chapter 2), and publishing it on a digital platform along with selected media components of the artwork.

In turn, I also show how the evolving discourse of processual conservation is compatible with the decoupling of conservation from ownership, the gallery, and the boundaries of an institution.

## Specialist conservation documentation publishing initiatives

In previous chapters I've discussed various collaborative initiatives to produce and share knowledge and documentation about contemporary art. In this section I will examine these initiatives through the lens of publishing in order to lay the ground for identifying differences with the projects that are central to this chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the emergence of contemporary art conservation is linked to collaborative projects involving museums and other types of organisations. Although many of them have tended to use specialist language, they have pioneered making more visible the work and negotiations that take place behind the walls of the institution.

Following the launch of the online repository, the INCCA network undertook another major research project, Inside Installations, which is described in Chapter 3. Multi-layered and interdependent documentation was gathered in an online platform. The website offered more than a solution to the overly restrictive nature of the database. It allowed contributors to organise and contextualise the documentation as they saw fit: to include only relevant documents, to indicate their various interdependencies through categories and hyperlinks, and to provide the broader context of the overall research process as a narrative. In short, to select, link and shape the collected content through editing and writing, similar to the editing of artwork records in a museum content management system described in Chapter 2.

As in that example, rather than being the work of an invisible, objective hand, the authorship of the contributions is affirmed, and many are attuned to self-reflection, articulating dilemmas and weighing options, acknowledging the persona of conservator and researcher in the narrative.<sup>152</sup> Unlike the SFMOMA Team Media and Media Wiki examples,

<sup>152</sup> The case studies vary in depth and focus. Some are documented in a short PDF file uploaded to a dossier, but many are more comprehensive, see for example the dossiers on Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe & Philippe Parreno, Bill Spinhoven, Franz West, Joseph Kosuth, Ulrike Rosenbach, Krzysztof M. Bednarski, Artur Barrio, Ross Sinclair, Fabrizio Plessi, Olafur Eliasson, Jeffrey Shaw, Panamarenko, Ger van Elk and Suchan Kinoshita (<https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/artworks/index.php.html>, accessed 16

the collaborative framework of the Inside Installations project and its resources were not limited to one institution. On the one hand, the key to the project was to build a network of conservators and other professionals across institutions working on similar issues. This aspect was essential for many participants, especially as the field was still small and museums lacked relevant expertise.<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, the Inside Installations website was open to the public with no access restrictions.<sup>154</sup>

In line with the case studies, additional research was undertaken by the project participants, resulting in a compendium of guidelines and models presented on the website and in the accompanying book (Scholte & Wharton, 2011). Although the presentation of the case studies on the Inside Installations website is thorough and organised, the approach and rationale behind them is not made explicit, nor is it considered an example of a preservation strategy.<sup>155</sup> The resource is aimed specifically at conservators and related communities, although the project also included an experiment in communicating the preservation and presentation of two installations to a general audience.<sup>156</sup>

INCCA was preceded by another major research project, Modern Art: Who Cares?, the results of which were published together with case

October 2023).

153 <https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/OCMT/mydocs/Shifting%20role%20of%20the%20conservator.pdf>, accessed 16 October 2023.

154 The website was later moved from <http://www.inside-installations.org> to <https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/>, accessed 16 October 2023. Open access has been maintained.

155 The role of the website was briefly described “as a publishing medium for the documentation, findings and deliberations of the participants during the project’s life-span, and finally to present the deliverables from the project and its activities,” without reference to the models or further explanation.

<https://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/research/detail.network.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

156 The experiment was framed as an e-learning project and included dossiers on two works by Bruce Nauman and Carlos Garaicoa, created on the Tate website. The archived versions can be found at

[http://web.archive.org/web/20081003020820/http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/home\\_1.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20081003020820/http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/home_1.htm) and

[http://web.archive.org/web/20080621093224/http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/garaicoa/home\\_1.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20080621093224/http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/garaicoa/home_1.htm), both accessed 16 October 2023.

studies in a book (Hummelen & Sillé, 1999).<sup>157</sup> The project is another example of a cross-institutional case-based approach to examining dilemmas and decision-making in the preservation of works by living artists. While the impact of the INCCA database has been limited in terms of access due to confidentiality concerns, materials in both *Modern Art: Who Cares?* and *Inside Installation* were cleared for publication. They are primarily essayistic in form, although the language and style are clearly indebted to the daily practice of writing conservation and condition reports. Nonetheless, they pioneered authorial and polyvocal accounts from behind the scenes of art preservation and presentation.

The museum consortium Variable Media Network chose artworks for case studies to provide as wide a range of issues as possible. As with *Modern Art: Who Cares?* and *Inside Installations*, the case-based research served the overall aim of developing guidelines and models for the conservation of this genre, which in this case resulted in the Variable Media Questionnaire.<sup>158</sup> The documentation presented on the project website, which is still available today, is designed with this in mind.<sup>159</sup> After a brief curatorial and technical narrative about each work, there is a section where the strategy is applied to each work. Six of the case studies have been published in a book (Depocas, et al., 2003). The DOCAM alliance was, in a sense, a continuation of Variable Media and built up a somewhat richer resource.<sup>160</sup> Eighteen case studies were selected to develop best practice guidelines for cataloguing and conservation. Again, the cases were chosen to illustrate different conservation issues and some were installed in the process.

A consortium of museums, led by the ZKM, conceived the Digital Art Conservation project along similar lines. It aimed to create a “comprehensive catalogue of problems” and develop a documentation model, while at the same time restaging works, this time for a travelling

<sup>157</sup> Case study material on ten art objects makes up about a third of the 446-page tome. Each of the ten sections consists of two to four essays and interviews with various conservators, art historians and scientists. The project is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>158</sup> The project is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>159</sup> <https://variablemedia.net/e/index.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>160</sup> <http://docam.ca/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

exhibition. The online publication is very modest when it comes to conservation details,<sup>161</sup> but the accompanying book offers a well-researched personal account of the reinstallation of ten artworks, accompanied by interviews with artists (Serejhe, 2013).

The projects discussed followed a common pattern. Researchers selected artworks manifesting different conservation problems and carried out their reinstallations in a dialogical and reflective manner. Their efforts were framed by the aim of developing more general models for the preservation and presentation of different art forms, including installation, media and digital art. Although the resulting models have rarely been closely followed in conservation practice, these ambitions have served primarily as vehicles for generalising particular problems and focusing on the commonalities between very different works. We can see this, for example, in the Variable Media project, where the notion of ‘performed’ works ended up being applied not only to performance art, but also to installations such as Meg Webster’s *Stick Spiral*, in which museum staff are instructed on how to complete works for display. The resulting online and print publications brought together scholarly research and documentation, including interviews with artists, and were generally aimed at a specialist audience.

## **Public-facing conservation documentation publishing initiatives**

In contrast to these initiatives, other projects were aimed at a potentially wider audience, some specifically at the general public. I will highlight some of the new aspects they have brought.

In 2009, the Getty Foundation launched a project to develop models for the scholarly publication of museum collection catalogues. The Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative (OSCI) sought to find alternatives to costly printed volumes that are difficult to update regularly and limited in scope (Getty Foundation, 2017: 2).<sup>162</sup> As part of this initiative, the Getty worked

161 <https://www.digitalartconservation.org/index.php/en/case-studies.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

162 <https://www.getty.edu/publications/osci-report/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

with nine museums in the United States and the UK to produce a series of web-based multimedia publications that build on internal collections management systems and enhance collections online with in-depth scholarly content. Several are dedicated to contemporary art, such as SFMOMA's Rauschenberg Research Project, based on nearly ninety works in the museum's collection. The online catalogue presents a range of materials on the work of Robert Rauschenberg, giving equal weight to art historical context and conservation, including newly commissioned essays, image reproductions and video interviews, as well as artist statements, conservation reports and archival material. From the perspective of changing artworks, the works included could be considered traditional, as their conservation is primarily concerned with material stability. However, in terms of the extent to which it opens up museum vaults, this publication is unprecedented.

In Focus is another collection-based research project, designed as a scholarly extension of Tate's collection catalogue.<sup>163</sup> It is a long-term, open-ended editorial project managed by the museum's collections research department and funded in large part by private sources such as Christie's and the Terra Art Foundation, as well as through museum-university partnerships. Artworks' dossiers can be thought of as self-contained publications, comprising essays in which invited specialists explore in depth various aspects of the work's making and history, similar to the scholarly articles in exhibition catalogues. They draw on Tate's research resources and include material from conservation files, gallery records and archives.

The Artist Archives project, initiated by Glenn Wharton and Deena Engel of New York University, is a resource designed to assist curators, conservators, and others researching the work of selected artists.<sup>164</sup> The first two editions are dedicated to David Wojnarowicz and Joan Jonas. The editors have gathered information for future exhibitions, conservation interventions and writing about the artists' work. While Rauschenberg Project and In Focus are designed as sections of museum websites, Artist Archives are self-contained websites dedicated to each artist.

<sup>163</sup> <https://tate.org.uk/research/in-focus>, accessed 16 October 2023.

<sup>164</sup> <http://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

The aim of the Net Art Anthology, created by the New York-based initiative Rhizome, is to draw attention to net-based work. The publication is a self-contained website with subpages dedicated to one hundred selected artworks. Rather than following a structured template, the content of the entries is divided into blocks and rearranged to present a linear narrative based primarily on a selected article about the work by an art critic, supplemented by other sources. The narrative stands out from other similar publications. It is easy to read and combines the historical, technical and conservation context of the work in what can be seen as an extended wall label for an artwork in the age of Twitter. In this respect, the approach can also be understood in terms of storytelling. The entries are accompanied by additional material on Rhizome's website, including interviews with artists and essays commissioned from art critics. The form of the works, which are primarily net-based, allowed them to be presented as in an online exhibition, as individual re-stagings, accessible within the browser through emulation and other strategies. Unlike the previous examples, this anthology was accompanied by gallery exhibitions of selected works.

Partly inspired by Rhizome's Anthology, and primarily in response to the specific situation of digital art in Dutch museums, LIMA describes its Digital Canon as an activist act (Bosma, et al., 2018). Like Rhizome, LIMA is not a museum, but it has maintained a catalogue of media art since the 1980s. With this project, it has focused on a part of the field that is still underrepresented in Dutch museum collections, as media art is often only associated with video. Against this backdrop, LIMA has set out to provide museums with an entry point to digital art, an online catalogue entitled Digital Canon. With a team of curators and historians, LIMA has compiled and released a long list of historical works, from which it has selected twenty works and produced documentary entries on a dedicated website. The entries focus on technical narrative. They can't be seen as an online exhibition, as most of the works have dedicated physical components, except for net-based works presented as screencasts. As project director Gaby Wijers said, "bringing these works into attention is also a preservation strategy. It is a perfect way to reconnect with new technologies and new audiences. LIMA has started to work with academies to take this Canon as case studies to discuss the history of

digital art.”<sup>165</sup> In addition to this work, a gallery exhibition is also planned, which will further develop this resource.

Compared to earlier examples, these more recent projects present works in broader contexts, where discussions of conservation and preservation dilemmas are complemented by polyvocal perspectives on the historical and contemporary significance of the works. While the former use artworks as case studies—as a means of addressing research questions—these latter publications focus more on the aspect of presentation, employing conservation research to enrich the transmission of artworks through publication. They are aimed at both specialist and general audiences.

## Editing

In Chapter 2 I described how the use of content management systems to create and organise collection documentation can address a number of conservation issues at once. Documents and data scattered across different systems can be made readily available by selecting those relevant to the identity and presentation of an artwork and bringing them together in one place. The article-oriented administration interface of these platforms avoids the limitations of tabular form and allows for flexible template structures, as well as linking and referencing of parts of the content. In addition, assembling documentation into a common dossier makes it easier to shape its focus, tone, voice and language into a more coherent and legible narrative. It also provides an opportunity to highlight assumptions and dilemmas that have informed decisions in previous installations of the work. Taken together, and following Greenberg's (2018) definition, this practice can be described as editing. The two recent projects discussed in this chapter provide good examples of the use of editing for a public purpose, in contrast to the internally focused efforts behind the SFMOMA Media Wiki discussed in Chapter 2.

The Net Art Anthology is a unique art conservation project whose central presentation medium, the web, is the focal medium of its artworks. This allowed it to combine publication and exhibition in a single

<sup>165</sup> Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

online platform. Michael Connor has described the artwork entries in the anthology as ‘hypertextual narratives’ (2016). The entries link artwork description, emulation and documentation with contextual information, reception, artists' statements and biographies. By subjecting this wide range of elements and sources to a discrete yet linear overarching narrative, they become more compact and comprehensive. The lack of headings is not a hindrance to reading and navigation, as the text is relatively short and arranged in rectangles of text and media in a nod to social media content design standards. The voice is moderate and tends towards third-person narration. The narrator's apparent intimate familiarity with the works is balanced by a certain art historical detachment, in its neutrality akin to Wikipedia articles. The narrator carefully weaves literary references into the narrative, but rather than becoming embedded in the discourse of the artwork, the voice is much more restrained than in academic texts. Quotations in most entries are taken from a single relevant essay and rarely exceed several sentences. Unlike scholarly articles, the entries are not signed. The focus and tone have more in common with gallery wall labels than with the reflexive testimonies of conservation research projects.

The voice of the conservator is virtually absent. This is despite the fact that Rhizome has been deeply involved in the reinterpretation and restoration of many of the works included. This is partly due to the third person perspective, which avoids the agency present in the restoration process. It is also due to a cautious effort not to overwhelm the viewer with too much information. The result is a stereotypical divide between the public-facing curatorial perspective and the inward-looking conservation that remains behind the walls of an institution. So what exactly makes Net Art Anthology a public-facing conservation documentation publishing initiative if it hardly communicates anything about conservation?

**NET ART ANTHOLOGY**

“THE WORKS HAD THAT SORT OF HERE AND NOW ENCOUNTER. THAT THING WAS ALWAYS OPEN, TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. IT WAS ALL THE TIME LIVE.”  
— MARTINE NEDDAM

Mouchette's personal website, hosted at mouchette.org, is by now a vast trove of pages. Neddam continues to spend hours per week keeping it up to date, adding new works, moderating comments, and fixing deprecated code. Liveness is crucial to Neddam's practice, so the work featured in this online exhibition is a direct link to her live site.



Read "[A Girl Made of Language](#)" by Michael Connor on Rhizome.

An earlier point in Mouchette's trajectory can be glimpsed in Mouchette's contribution to the web zine *Why Not Sneeze?* in 1997, also presented here. The page is covered with small pebbles and crawling ants, who seem almost to crawl on the viewer's screen. Suggestive phrases like "a little further ...." encourage the visitor to "touch" the screen with the mouse in search of a hidden link.

Visit partial copy of 1997 work from [Why Not Sneeze?](#)

One transparent gif on *Why Not Sneeze?* links back to Mouchette's profile page, which drew on and amplified the playful kinds of self-presentation that characterized the bio, underlines since the beginning of the project, expands on the classic internet mantra of Age/Sex/location, but not by much: "My name is Mouchette, I live in Amsterdam. I am an artist. I am nearly 13 years old."



At that time, Mouchette's own site also offered links to several multi-user virtual worlds that she frequented, including instructions for finding her, or an interactive bot that she created. She directed visitors to text-based worlds called MOOS and to a pictorial one known as ThePalace.



Figure 18. Section of the entry on *Mouchette* by Martine Neddam in Net Art Anthology.<sup>166</sup>

The anthology does not address conservation in a reflexive way, but unlike other exhibitions of net-based works, it does present information and knowledge relevant to preservation. To document a media-based artwork, Laurenson (2001) suggests identifying its components and elements, explaining how they are connected, describing their roles in terms of aesthetics and functionality, and identifying the factors most likely to prevent each component from fulfilling its role. The texts in the Net Art Anthology do describe various components and elements of the artworks, although not systematically, nor do they go into depth about their relationships, roles, vulnerabilities, parameters and decision-making involved. They do, however, invest in exploring the intentions behind the works with various stakeholders, and in analysing the socio-cultural and technological contexts of the works' production, which provide information for determining significant properties of the

166 <https://anthology.rhizome.org/mouchette>, accessed 16 October 2023.

artworks.<sup>167</sup> In addition, the web-based, publicly accessible emulation environment allows for close examination of the art objects.

DIGITAL ART (1960-2000)

**TITLE** Mouchette.org

**ARTIST** Martine Neddam

**YEAR** 1996-ongoing

**SITEMAP**

**WEBSITE** mouchette.org (Artwork website)

Parts of the work are also considered to exist as mouchette.net and ihatemouchette.org

**KEYWORDS** net art, net.art, internet art, interactive, website, virtual character, persona, identity, gender, online diary, personal website, performance, suicide, death, sex

**IMAGES** Screen capture of [www.mouchette.org/index.html](http://www.mouchette.org/index.html)

BIOGRAPHY ARTIST

Martine Neddam is a visual artist best known for her works that explore online identity through the creation of virtual characters. She has developed a number of significant virtual characters, namely *Mouchette.org* (1996), *David Still* (2001), and *XiaoQian* (2006), for which her position as an artist behind them was initially anonymous. She does this to be able to explore the multi-layered and complex expressions and experiences of, and reactions to, personalities found online. In addition to these characters she has also

SOFTWARE

Many of the original pages of *Mouchette.org* were written in HTML. In 1998, Neddam commissioned an interface in PHP to be built and through 2001 it was updated using Flash, PHP, and Javascript. A MySQL database was also built to manage

PRODUCTION

Since its inception as an interactive website in 1996, *Mouchette.org* has continued to grow and evolve into many digital works that exist across various domains and subdomains. There are also extensions of the project that are not browser-based and/or exist as offline presentations, projects, and objects, all of which make up the constellation of items and activities that are part of the overall project of *Mouchette*.

PART OF COLLECTION

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam & MOTI (collective purchase) - 2016

Figure 19. Section of the entry on *Mouchette* by Martine Neddam on Digital Canon.<sup>168</sup>

The Net Art Anthology was an important reference for LIMA's Digital Canon. The entries in the Digital Canon are also anonymous. The information comes mainly from published sources, listed as literature, some of which are also referenced in the text. The artists or their representatives were consulted about the content, but some didn't respond.<sup>169</sup> None of the artists raised the issue of confidentiality.<sup>170</sup> The

167 For example, the navigation of Martine Neddam's long-term web-based performative work *Mouchette* is linked to her deep influence by the text-based and programmable environment of the MOOs. The artist's anonymity maintained for more than a decade of the work's existence is explained by giving visitors more space to invent the character in their own way, followed by a quote from the artist: "The web character is not so much a portrait as a platform with a certain design ... to find a situation where people exchange with each other inside that character" (<https://anthology.rhizome.org/mouchette>, accessed 16 October 2023).

168 <https://digitalcanon.nl/#464>, accessed 16 October 2023.

169 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

170 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

content follows a template created for the publication, which includes attribution information, technical specifications, a description of the artwork and the context of the work in relation to the artist's oeuvre, art discourse and collections. Like Net Art Anthology, the website functions as an inventory of artworks, though not as an exhibition, as it includes only a few instances of net-based works, and rather than re-staging through emulation, the works are represented through video registration and documentation.

Whereas the content of the Net Art Anthology is split between a concise 'wall label' narrative presented on the platform, and more in-depth analysis in the form of essays and interviews presented on Rhizome's main website, the Digital Canon is a self-contained website, with each artwork's documentation presented on a single page. This makes the entries more comprehensive. Digital Canon also uses discrete panels to structure the textual and visual material, but rather than unifying the content into a linear narrative, it is divided into a series of blocks with headings, giving it the appearance of a tabular form. The layout is dominated by text, with visual content limited to a single panel in each entry, which, together with the grid-like structure, gives the impression of a research poster. The style is technical and administrative. The third-person narrative doesn't lend itself to a reflexive mode, which is related to the fact that the project hasn't yet reinstalled many of the artworks included. Nevertheless, Digital Canon provides details about components and elements, as well as the behaviour, intentions and context of the artworks.

In terms of organising content, editing is a crucial difference between projects like Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon and online repositories like the INCCA database. But they also differ from other editorial initiatives, such as the SFMOMA Media Wiki, in that they have been published.

## Publishing

Publishing is ancillary to the missions of Rhizome and LIMA, though not by chance. Both initiatives have engaged with publishing in various ways.

Rhizome's official website functions as an online magazine, featuring essays, interviews and other contributions from a wide range of authors and artists. It has also released a number of open source software applications, which it continues to maintain.<sup>171</sup> LIMA and its predecessors NIMk and MonteVideo have produced a series of printed books of preservation guidelines and research, as well as online resources. In this section, I will analyse both projects in terms of different aspects of publishing.

### **Modelling and filtering**

The motivations behind Net Art Anthology can be traced back to attempts to restore Rhizome's archive. Rhizome started in the mid-1990s as an online community engaged with digital culture. The email list served as a forum for the exchange of ideas, but also as a stage for the presentation of new works and projects (Rossenova, 2020: 7). In order to create "a more permanent and accessible index [...] of web based work emerging from the community", the organisation set up an online archive, ArtBase, where artists and makers were invited to deposit their work (Owens, 2012). They could do this by linking to the website of a particular work, or by contributing its source code to the repository, along with documentation.<sup>172</sup> Originally, there were no acquisition criteria other than that a work could be considered new media art (Rossenova, 2020: 15-6).

By the late 2000s, however, it became clear that this approach was not sustainable, as over the years many submitted artworks were found to be inoperable, and diffuse art objects with third-party dependencies became increasingly common (Rossenova, 2020: 16-7). Importantly, the descriptions and statements submitted by the artists were not sufficient to keep the artworks accessible (Connor, 2019). This led the organisation to begin narrowing its filtering criteria, but also to begin developing

171 Rhizome's GitHub repository at <https://github.com/rhizomedotorg> contains a number of releases. Other projects such as Webrecorder and Oldweb-today are hosted separately at <https://github.com/webrecorder> and <https://github.com/oldweb-today>, all accessed 16 October 2023.

172 Contributions were thus archived as 'linked objects' and 'cloned objects', respectively.

preservation tools and approaches for born-digital art (Roszenova, 2020: 16). By the mid-2010s, the ArtBase contained over two thousand works (Owens, 2012) and as Rhizome moved the archive to a more dynamic data infrastructure, it became clear that restoring all of the works was not feasible (Connor, 2019). Rhizome therefore initiated a related project to present one hundred selected artworks as part of an exhibition. The works would be “revisited” using strategies ranging from “simple documentation to complete technical restoration” and featured in an online and gallery exhibition curated by Rhizome (Connor, 2019).

Rhizome has modelled the project as a “retelling the history of net art” in a broad sense, foregrounding the works themselves so that they could be subjected to first-hand experience (Connor, 2019). The organisation “cautiously described the project as sketching a possible canon” (Connor, 2019). This model proved advantageous as Rhizome was able to secure funding from a newly established private foundation that was building a collection of digital art and supporting initiatives to raise the profile of this art field.<sup>173</sup>

The selection process was therefore informed by a mix of preservation and curatorial motivations. The selection was “led by [its artistic director] Michael Connor and informed by Rhizome staff and a network of external advisors”.<sup>174</sup> Positioning the project as a new history of net art (Connor, 2019), one criterion for inclusion was the historical significance of a work, while keeping in mind the intention to equally represent different historical periods, as well as genres, themes, and artistic strategies and contexts (Figure 20). A crucial aspect of the selection process was the actual legacy of Rhizome as an organisation. The composition of the ArtBase in terms of artists and artworks is diverse, but past and present staff were aware that “the world of art and technology in Rhizome’s history will tend to perpetuate Rhizome’s existence as a mostly white, male scene,” making it all the more urgent to make the programming “diverse and inclusive and equitable” (Tribe cited in Roszenova, 2020: 104). In the Anthology, this motive has translated into an attempt to represent more diverse artist identities in terms of gender, race and origin. In addition, the selection of test cases useful for

173 <https://thomafoundation.org/about/what-we-do/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

174 <https://anthology.rhizome.org/>, accessed 16 October 2023.

developing new preservation strategies also played a role (Rossenova, 2020: 21).

While selection is a key activity to both building collections and curating exhibitions, it also has a constitutive role in publishing. Publishers select in order to highlight what readers should read. This process is associated with gate-keeping but it spans more than the work of acquisition editors. In his theory of publishing, Bhaskar (2013, 2014) employs the term ‘filtering’ as it broadens its role in the print era when publishers had a crucial part in deciding which texts to make a reality to also account for today’s situation when in the presence of the Internet, content is ubiquitous and abundant and publishers filter content not as much to make it happen as to make it noteworthy. Filtering content for publishing spans a wide range of practices from commissioning an author’s novel to content moderation on Facebook (Bhaskar, 2013: 106-8).

On the fundamental level, publishers filter according to a set of motivations, or more broadly, a model. Models guide publishing to generate value at a tolerable cost. The definition of value relies on the case and it is not necessarily limited to economics, since political, aesthetic, religious and social concerns also shape models. In fact, models are made of numerous components and are likely to combine financial and nonfinancial considerations. The economic reality of publishing is complicated in the present by incentives to accrue cultural capital and prestige but social agenda and aesthetic choices may also play a role (Bhaskar, 2013: 159-60). This was the case of Net Art Anthology. Its model involved, on the one hand, the ambition to elevate the standing of an ephemeral art field through creating and safeguarding a culturally attentive historical canon, and on the other, strategical alignment with a private collection as its indirect benefactor capable of supporting it financially. This in turn guided the filtering process.

## NET ART ANTHOLOGY

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 Michael Connor, Artistic Director  
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 Dragan Espenschied, Preservation Director  
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 Nora N. Khan, Special Projects Editor  
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 Mendi + Keith Obadike

### ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Google & [Google Arts & Culture](#) generously support Rhizome's digital preservation program.

PRESENTED BY    **RHIZOME**

### STRUCTURE

Net Art Anthology will play out in five distinct chapters. The first four will be chronological: early network cultures and early web (through 1998); Flash and blogs (1999-2005); surf clubs, early postinternet art, and social media platforms (2006-2011); and mobile apps and social media saturation (2012-present). The final chapter will reprise all time periods, addressing gaps that emerge over the course of the project.

### CRITERIA

The project specifically celebrates works of net art that:

1. Use the net in ways that give expression to emerging subjectivities,
2. Model new forms of collective cultural practice, and/or
3. Exemplify aesthetic, subjective, political, and conceptual positions that have taken on singular and profound resonance within particular networks of artists.
4. Can be meaningfully restaged, reconstructed, or reperformed for this exhibition.

### SELECTION

The selection of works for this series is taking place on an ongoing basis, and feedback/suggestions are welcome. The selection is led by Michael Connor and informed by Rhizome staff and a network of external advisors. Feedback can be sent to [curatorial@rhizome.org](mailto:curatorial@rhizome.org).

### DEFINITION

Net Art Anthology aims to represent net art as an expansive, hybrid set of artistic practices that overlap with many media and disciplines. To accommodate this diversity of practice, Rhizome has defined "net art" as "art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it."

Rhizome prefers the term "net art" because it has been used more widely by artists than "internet art," which is more commonly used by institutions, or "net.art," which usually evokes a specific mid-90s movement. The informality of the term "net art" is also appropriate not only to the critical use of the web as an artistic medium, but also informal practices such as selfies and Twitter poems.

Figure 20. The colophon of Net Art Anthology including selection criteria.<sup>175</sup>

The model behind Digital Canon is similar. LIMA also aims to increase the visibility and recognition of digital art by highlighting its canonical works. LIMA continues the work begun in the late 1970s by its predecessor, MonteVideo, which pioneered the presentation, production and distribution of video and media art. In the early 1990s, the videotapes in the collection began to deteriorate, prompting the organisation to include preservation as part of its core mission (Coelho, 2014).<sup>176</sup> There were several important media art initiatives in the Netherlands at the time, but MonteVideo was the first to develop expertise in media preservation, spearheading a collaborative effort in the 1990s to catalogue and preserve the video collections of Dutch museums and institutions (van Hal, 1999).<sup>177</sup> Notably, MonteVideo made its part of the catalogue available online and hosted an access terminal at its venue in 1998.<sup>178</sup>

The organisation was later incorporated into the NIMk, only to become independent again as LIMA, and continues to collaborate with art museums in the Netherlands to this day. Over the years, the care of the

175 Screenshot taken from <https://anthology.rhizome.org/>, accessed 14 June 2020.

176 <https://sipad2014.sched.com/speaker/ramoncoehlo>, accessed 16 October 2023.

177 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 21 February 2017.

178 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 21 February 2017.

country's video holdings has expanded to include the care of the media components of art objects, including digital files and software. First, in the early 2000s, a project was undertaken to digitise video works by over 450 artists, and as part of its follow-up in the 2010s, the preservation of digital art began to be considered.<sup>179</sup> The digitisation efforts have recently culminated in the launch of an online union catalogue of media art collections from LIMA, Stedelijk Amsterdam, Van Abbemuseum and other collections where full access to video works can be requested by researchers.<sup>180</sup>

While media art is generally associated with video-based works, other approaches, such as software and performance-based practices, are sidelined in collections, despite their increasing prominence in recent decades.<sup>181</sup> Through its ongoing engagement with experimental media-based artistic practices over four decades, LIMA has developed a comprehensive understanding of the field.<sup>182</sup> In order to bring these sidelined practices to the fore, it has framed them under the rubric of digital art and launched a project to present twenty selected influential artworks made in the Netherlands in the 20th century on a dedicated website and in an exhibition.

The emphasis on digital art in the Digital Canon is strategic. The term so far has not get a traction in a museum context and, despite its long history, represents an under-explored territory from a collecting perspective.<sup>183</sup> It curbs the emphasis on video and implies a much wider range of artistic media. In order to “generate attention for digital art, and its history, and to encourage museums to acquire such works,” LIMA has set its efforts against the backdrop of canonisation (Huisman, 2019). Reflection on the process of canonisation has become an important focus of the research project, more explicitly than in the case of the Net Art Anthology. What could have been perceived as an overly self-confident gesture in adopting the authoritative term was counterbalanced by a long-

<sup>179</sup> Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 21 February 2017.

<sup>180</sup> <http://mediakunst.net/>

<sup>181</sup> Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

<sup>182</sup> An important milestone was the launch of ArtHost, an online storage service for media and online art, in 2019 (<https://arthost.nl>, accessed 16 October 2023).

<sup>183</sup> Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

term, inclusive decision-making process that was documented and published alongside the works for future scrutiny (Huisman, 2019). This was linked to another motivation behind the project, which was to shine a light on the selection process that is usually hidden in museum acquisitions, in other words, to make selection a participatory process.<sup>184</sup>

The screenshot shows a dark-themed website for 'DIGITAL ART (1960-2000)'. At the top right are links for 'SITEMAP' and 'GOTO FRONTSIDE'. The main content area contains text about the LIMA project and a numbered list of fifteen criteria for inclusion in the Digital Canon.

In order to spur this discussion forwards, LIMA have undertaken the task of attempting to canonize digital art's complex history through their Digital Art Canon project. In collaboration with Josephine Bosma, Martijn van Boven, Annet Dekker, Sandra Fauconnier and Jan Robert Leegte, LIMA has done so according to the several criteria that the work:

- 1) has artistic value (substantive depth, conceptual depth) within the field of visual arts
- 2) is artistically innovative (at the time)
- 3) is also relevant outside the domain of technology
- 4) is also relevant and interesting for foreign countries, not just for the Dutch (digital) art field
- 5) is unique and / or has a pioneering role (does not follow an existing type of aesthetics nor repeats artistic strategies already that are already used by others in a similar way)
- 6) has a national/international pioneering role
- 7) is exemplary for the development of digital culture (in the Netherlands)
- 8) will be remembered: 'that was very special'
- 9) has made a valuable contribution to the visual arts
- 10) belongs to the 'technical' avant-garde
- 11) is a link to older works or new works (by other artists, or within a maker's oeuvre)
- 12) can be regarded as the beginning of a new technology in its time; the start of a new genre
- 13) visualizes a particular cultural, technological, physical or philosophical fact by its unique use of technology
- 14) falls under the broad definition of digital culture, as used by Creative Industries Fund NL
- 15) reveals the aesthetics of a technological phenomenon in image and sound.

In doing so, they hope to further debate on the role of the institution when it comes to the exhibition, contextualization, and historicization of digital art.

Figure 21. The criteria for inclusion in Digital Canon (Van Wynsberghe, 2019).

The criteria for inclusion were developed in a series of workshops hosted by LIMA in collaboration with a group of five core experts and international collaborators, the proceedings of which are included on the website along with the list of fifteen criteria (Figure 21).<sup>185</sup> As the

184 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

185 See texts and colophon at <https://digitalcanon.nl/#backside>, accessed 16 October 2023.

exhibition framework was not the primary focus of the project, the works were considered less on a curatorial basis than on their individual merits.

This was also due to the different composition of the selection committee. Rhizome used an external advisory committee to assist in the selection of pre-2005 historical works submitted by artists to its ArtBase, and divided the works into five curatorial chapters. LIMA, on the other hand, delegated control of the selection to a diverse working group dominated by external collaborators, where a balanced representation of different periods, genres, themes, strategies and contexts would be more difficult to achieve. Instead, the declared significance of the works was sought in their artistic and technological novelty and cultural impact.<sup>186</sup> In terms of artists' identities, gender has been taken into account and,<sup>187</sup> despite the territorial scope of the project, the selection goes beyond artists of Dutch origin. In addition to the weight of the partners, the influence of financial support on the selection of content cannot be ignored. LIMA has acknowledged in one of its stated criteria that the artworks submitted fit the definition of digital culture provided by the project sponsor, a Dutch national fund that supports digital culture as one of its pillars of the creative industries.<sup>188</sup> Thus, what has been said about the model behind Net Art Anthology also applies to Digital Canon - its fundamental aim of preserving digital art by elevating its status through historisation and canonisation was complemented by a strategic alignment with a fund sponsoring the field. This in turn shaped the filtering process.

## **Framing**

Both Digital Canon and Net Art Anthology are presented as freely accessible online websites, making them available through any device

<sup>186</sup> The criterium of novelty can be read from the points 2, 5, 10, 12 and 13, while impact can be seen in the points 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 listed in Figure 19.

<sup>187</sup> Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

<sup>188</sup> See the criterium 14 in Figure 21 and [https://stimuleringsfonds.nl/en/the\\_fund/organization/about\\_the\\_fund/](https://stimuleringsfonds.nl/en/the_fund/organization/about_the_fund/), accessed 16 October 2023.

connected to the Internet.<sup>189</sup> In addition to the ease of access, the website medium lends them other specific properties that are not available to other publication formats such as books. In terms of content, these include the possibility of presenting videos and, above all, software emulations. These distribution and storage features are now commonplace in publishing. Bhaskar (2014) writes that in the print age the distributional aspect of publishing was most important, but today “code, servers, screens are still distributional, but because they are so democratic, distribution doesn’t mean so much.” Bhaskar (2013: 89-96) therefore broadens the concept of publication beyond the view of containers with certain expressive means derived from their properties to account for subjective aspects as well.

What he calls ‘framing’ involves the deliberate use of “the brand of the publisher, the buzz around a [publication], the design signals, [and] the messaging” (Bhaskar, 2014). Following Erving Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis, in which the frame is what makes the encounter intelligible to the participants, Bhaskar (2013: 90) argues that frames represent the formal role of mediation in both the expression and reception of content, as they “precede and therefore condition our interactions.” In other words, frames are “not just delivery systems or packages for content,” but they also “actively create the experience of media.” Content creators and intermediaries “carefully design frames to achieve precise results.” Publishers are “no longer just makers of books—they must be framers of content in the widest possible sense” (Bhaskar, 2014). And if books are now often read on mobile phones, why not publish websites?

The Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon are both self-published and ‘distributed’ by the originating organisations, without the intermediaries typical of standard publishing. Rhizome has asserted its brand by placing its logo prominently throughout the Anthology and by placing the website on a subdomain under rhizome.org. Rhizome has also framed the Anthology as an online exhibition, presenting live artworks with clear and accessible curatorial texts. The graphic design reinforces

<sup>189</sup> The Net Art Anthology website runs on Grav, a self-hosted content management system. It uses a flat file database, as opposed to a relational database used by other popular systems such as WordPress, which also means that its content is article-based not only on display but also in storage. Digital Canon runs on WordPress.

this message with rectangular objects set against a monochrome background. Importantly, the project was accompanied by an exhibition at a major New York museum and a 400-page book catalogue (Connor, et al., 2019).

The framing of Digital Canon is more ambiguous. The project is hosted on a dedicated domain with no reference to LIMA, and the relationship between the two is presented more subtly. The website can be seen as a virtual reference site with an overtone of honorary awards. In terms of structure, language and tone, the project has aspects of a collection catalogue, an online exhibition, a case study research project and a scholarly monograph. The ambiguous format is further overshadowed by the bold design of a semi-transparent double-sided panel that can be flipped back and forth, with navigation accompanied by a 3D visual effect in a nod to net art.<sup>190</sup> Digital Canon is still ongoing and the website is likely to be expanded, also in conjunction with a project exhibition planned for 2023.

## ***Amplifying***

Creating a website and making it public by including it in search engines was not enough; publications need publicity. As mentioned above, gallery exhibitions widened the scope of both projects. So did other events, including the launches of the websites, which provided an opportunity to open up the premises and results of the projects to public debate and wider attention.<sup>191</sup> However, the language they used in going public was

190 [https://digitalcanon.nl/?page\\_id=474#list](https://digitalcanon.nl/?page_id=474#list), accessed 16 October 2023.

191 Net Art Anthology was launched at the beginning of the publication phase in October 2016 at the New Museum, New York (<https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1106/the-art-happens-here-net-art-anthology-launch-1>, accessed 16 October 2023). Other public events included a panel discussion (November 2017), a gallery exhibition (January-May 2019, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/the-art-happens-here-net-art-s-archival-poetics>, accessed 16 October 2023), and a book launch (March 2019). All of these featured some of the artists involved and took place at the New Museum. Digital Canon was launched at LIMA in Amsterdam in March 2019 (<https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/news/digital-canon-launch>, accessed 16 October 2023), and a gallery exhibition is planned for autumn 2023.

cautious and modest, acknowledging their potential controversy and encouraging critique of the choices and suggestions of alternatives (Connor, 2019; Huisman, 2019). Rhizome's strategy was to spread the exposure of the anthology over two years, releasing one work each week, while also featuring its creators and critics in new interviews and essays on the institutional website.

There are many ways to draw people to a work. Bhaskar (2014) says that traditionally this was done by getting reviews and, above all, by securing slots in bookstores. In a situation of content abundance, however, the role of publishers shifts from making a work available to making it known. Bhaskar (2013: 114ff) therefore extends the common understanding of publishing as the act of 'making public' to also consider 'amplification'. The aim is to harness attention and increase the exposure or value of content, ensuring that a work is encountered more widely. Amplification is what distinguishes publishing from content creation (i.e. book making), for which publicity is not relevant. "Creation is writing, publication is amplifying the writing; that is, it is the process of ensuring people aside from the creator read it" (Bhaskar, 2013: 115). It is enabled by framing: publishers frame content in order to amplify it.

This is even more evident in the context of digital publishing and content abundance, where framing relies less on physical distribution mechanisms and more on "digital presentation and signalling processes" (Bhaskar, 2013: 177). Accordingly, amplification "need not just be product-facing, striving for greater levels of unit production," but can be "reception-facing, as in our own era when the strategies and technologies of market making or audience building start to take precedence over duplication and distribution" (Bhaskar, 2013: 131). Thus, framing a catalogue of digital artworks as a canonical online exhibition produced by a prestigious digital arts organisation increases its potential for amplification.

In summary, following Bhaskar's (2013, 2014) model of publishing, filtering and amplification occur through frames according to models, and together with framing they provide the 'how' of publishing, while modelling gives us the 'why'. In this way, Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon build on the efforts of earlier conservation research catalogues and set new directions. Unlike projects such as Inside Installations and

Variable Media Network, their intention is not so much to produce case studies as to focus on the aspect of presentation. And unlike projects such as the Robert Rauschenberg Project and In Focus, which are based on a particular collection, they are concerned with domain research. These dispositions have shaped their approaches.

They followed a model of preserving an ephemeral art field by elevating its status through historisation and reflexive canonisation, complemented by strategic alignment with a funder. The model governed the process of filtering, in which selection criteria were articulated and applied by the respective organisations in collaboration with networks of experts in the field. Rather than being reducible to curatorial decisions, the criteria encompassed a complex set of aesthetic, cultural, technological and representational considerations. The projects were framed as an online exhibition or publication, extended to printed matter and gallery exhibitions, and utilised branding and design. In this way, they not only made public the otherwise hidden aspects of conservation, but also brought the artworks to new audiences. Similar threads of active engagement with filtering, framing and amplification can be found not only in Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon, but in all publishing.

Publishing has played a central role in research and knowledge production for centuries, because science is based on openness to empirical verification: knowledge is not taken on trust, but tested. Methods and results are made public and shared with other scientists. The key to this knowledge system is precisely its public nature (Phillips & Bhaskar, 2019: 9-10). When it comes to conservation, its “communicative turn,” has replaced “essentialist thinking about the true, original material condition of an object with a more hermeneutic approach in which interpretations and perspectives about the object become foregrounded” (Van Saaze, 2013: 82). Publishing then offers a different means of articulating “the subjectivity of decisions and attribution of values” (Van Saaze, 2013: 76) than when the results are presented only in the form of a gallery exhibition.

## Publishing as processual conservation

While many museum-led scholarly initiatives have used artworks as case studies—as tools to address theoretical questions—the projects such as the Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon place more weight on the presentational aspect, using conservation research to enrich the transmission of artworks through publishing. The emphasis on presentation foregrounds publishing as an approach that differs from the exhibition-centred conservation typically found in museum settings (especially in the case of installations).

These projects take the form of a website that interweaves commentary, expertise, documentation and reproduction of selected artworks in a multimedia ensemble, informed by the perspectives of their various stakeholders. In contrast to the austere online presentations of collections databases, they stand out as research publications that are attentive to the context and significance of the works presented, open to multiple perspectives, and informed by conservation scholarship.

It is worth noting that in both Rhizome's and LIMA's projects, preservation is not limited to a particular collection, a gallery exhibition, or the stakeholders of the works. In terms of the collection, many of the works included in the Net Art Anthology are part of Rhizome's ArtBase. However, the organisation does not own them, but rather has non-exclusive presentation and distribution rights, which it has obtained from the artists primarily on the occasion of their contributions to the ArtBase (Roszenova, 2020: 43, 111). Rhizome has been affiliated with the New Museum since 2003, although it frames ArtBase as an archive rather than a collection. In fact, the vast majority of the one hundred works included are not part of any museum collection.<sup>192</sup> Of the twenty works in Digital Canon, LIMA has three in its collection, and is responsible for maintaining two others on behalf of a museum.<sup>193</sup> At the time of writing, approximately half of the works included were not in any collection. For

<sup>192</sup> A list of net-based artworks in museum collections can be found at [https://monoskop.org/Net\\_art#Works\\_in\\_museum\\_collections](https://monoskop.org/Net_art#Works_in_museum_collections), accessed 16 October 2023. Only two of these works are included in the Net Art Anthology: Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon* (1998-1999), in the Guggenheim collection, and Martine Neddam, *Mouchette* (1996-ongoing), in the collections of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and MOTI Breda.

this project, LIMA sought permissions and content commentary from the artists, but not on a contractual basis, as it framed the project as a publication rather than an acquisition.<sup>194</sup>

As a result, the two organisations created virtual collections featuring one hundred and twenty works in total without resorting to exclusivity and ownership of artworks. In fact, by modelling their projects as canons they subverted the standard canonisation of modern and contemporary art associated mainly with acquisition to major museum collections, particularly that of MoMA (Smith, 2007; Cook & de Wild, 2017).

These projects have not been bound to gallery exhibitions as is typical for changing artworks in museums (as discussed in Chapter 2). While changing artworks ‘exist only when installed’, their site of completion in this case was not limited to the gallery. Their preservation has been supported through reproduction in digital publications, embedded in networked environment. In terms of stakeholders, rather than limited to the artist and museum staff, these projects have preserved artworks by an extended group of practitioners from the field that included invited advisors, writers, software developers and others.<sup>195</sup>

The introduction of changing artworks into collections has brought along the need to revise existing conceptions and practices of preservation. Fundamentally, this pertains to reassessing the typically direct, exclusive relation between the artist and the artwork, sustained by prevalent understanding of artist’s intent and authorship as something given at the point of origin of the artwork. Conservation research in the past decades has persistently argued that this assumption is incompatible with the nature of a large variety of contemporary art that instead manifests a realignment of professional roles in shaping the nature of an artwork. In her discussion of preserving media installations, Laurenson

193 The works in LIMA’s collection are Livinus van de Bundt & Jeep van de Bundt, *Moiré* (1970-1975); Bas van Koolwijk, *TST* (2000), and Steina, *Violin Power* (1969-1978). On behalf of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, LIMA is responsible for the maintenance of Martine Neddum, *Mouchette.org* (1996-ongoing); and Jan Robert Leegte, *Scrollbar Composition* (2000).

194 Gaby Wijers, in-person interview, 27 November 2019.

195 The credits for Net Art Anthology are included in Figure 18. The credits for Digital Canon are available at <https://digitalcanon.nl/#backside>, accessed 16 October 2023.

(2006) describes the need to abandon the aspiration to return the object to its original state and instead acknowledge change as integral to artwork's identity. She links the act of installing an installation to a performance, where results always vary since they rely on the interpretation of artwork's specifications. The process of completion of the work involves an element of indeterminacy. Van de Vall (2015) describes this shift in terms of paradigmatic difference between the scientific and the performance paradigm in conservation ethics. In the latter, "the core of the work is considered to consist in its concept, which should be realized through the faithful performance of a set of instructions stipulating the features defining the work's identity" (van de Vall, 2015).

Van Saaze (2013) affirms that the relation between the artist's concept and its carrying out in a reinstallation is not unidirectional, instead, authenticity and intent are 'being done'. She demonstrates that while "initiating artists are still very much considered to be the main authors" of installations, various museum professionals are involved and co-determine the process and should therefore also be taken into account (2013: 179). In contrast to the "notion of ownership defined as freezing the art object in a singular state," she argues for a "more tactile, practice-based, and interventionist kind of engagement of the museum professional" (2013: 179).

The transformative influence of changing artworks on the reading of authorship and the role of preservation is not limited to installations. Frieling (2014) extends the discussion to site-specific, relational and performance art. Unlike finite objects whose art status is granted by "virtue of being produced by the artist," central to these works are temporal experiences fostered by the artist as a collaborator. Frieling describes the process of exhibiting them in a museum as an "expanded performance" with "the artist, the institution and the public" serving as "co-producers" (2014: 156). Extending authorial agency to the audience, however, might from their perspective well imply a fleeting moment of participatory engagement, distanced from a more informed involvement of museum professionals. More recently, Dekker (2018) has brought into this debate the case of increasingly more common, open artworks, that are "freely available for everyone to use, share, document, collect, conserve." She argues that artists may extend or even transfer the

development and continuation of these works to curators, conservators or even to “people outside the scope of the museum.” While Van Saaze (2013) broadens the entrusting of preservation role to a spectrum of museum professionals, Dekker (2018) widens it further to include “experts as well as users.” In this setting, where artists continue to be important aids in the process, the museum assumes the role of facilitator for a “group of people that forms around an artwork to take care of it by sustaining (parts of) its continuation”, thus making up a “network of care” (Dekker, 2018).

This form of distributing authorial agency to advance care has been called proliferative, open, or community-based preservation (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2014: 163-5; Dekker, 2018: 115-6; Wharton, 2011: 10-14, 164-174). Along these lines, Bosma (2011) suggests to focus on co-producing, supporting or maintaining the ‘life’ of a work (165-6). Van de Vall (2015) assigns these approaches to the processual paradigm of conservation ethics that is distinct from scientific paradigm whose central aim is the material integrity of the work as a physical object, as well as from performance paradigm in that it can’t fully rely on the work’s conceptual identity that would be expressed as a range of properties and instructions. This is because processual works “change and develop according to uncontrollable factors or interventions from inside or outside the work, be it the weather, material decay, visitors’ interactions or participation” (2015: 14). In this context, “the main aim of conservation is support of the work’s continuation through transmission of the required information, skills and procedures to the designated participants or stakeholders” (2015: 8).<sup>196</sup>

From this follows that processual conservation does not limit its stakeholders to the artist and museum staff, nor is it tied to the spatiotemporal logic of exhibition where the artwork’s change would take place in a controlled manner. It challenges the link between conservation and collection by allowing for distributing agency in the process of safeguarding. The examples of Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon show that besides site-specific, relational and performance art it is relevant for digital art as well.

196 Van de Vall makes an analogy between these two approaches and music performance where “the performative model resemble[s] notated music like classical symphonies, whereas the processual model resemble[s] improvised music” (2015: 14).

As a conservation strategy, publishing may be considered a form of processual conservation. It builds upon documentation that interprets aspects of an artwork and results in a variety of documents that are further assembled and edited into coherent multimedia content. As discussed in Chapter 2, content management systems are capable of accommodating the process of editing that involves selection that helps to narrow down the complexity of documentation, shaping that helps to make it more legible, and linking that allows establishing relations among various elements. Other factors responsible for diverting means of conservation knowledge exchange from sharing data inside a network toward public-facing knowledge production, that were discussed in Chapter 3, are addressed by publishing the content along with selected media components of the artwork on a digital platform. In this process, the goals of the project are balanced with available funding policies and serve as a model for filtering content that simultaneously helps to deal with the increasing differentiation in the field. On the other hand, its professionalisation is beneficial for more apt framing and amplification towards new audiences.

Publishing as a conservation strategy presupposes, at the fundamental level, carrying out activities inherent in the work of publishers. Bhaskar's (2013) theory of publishing offers a framework suitable for analysing how this is done. This theory is not limited to the centrality of the book industry, but also considers digital and non-profit publishing, making it valid for exploring initiatives such as Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon. More specifically, the framework helps to reveal how their models of digital art preservation through canonisation have shaped the selection of artworks and how framing them as digital publications has enabled content to be amplified and brought to new audiences. Furthermore, this situation opens room for the implementation of peer review processes to ensure the quality of the resulting publication.

Recent preservation projects have succeeded in clarifying privacy and confidentiality issues and making conservation more explicitly public-facing activity. Making preservation more prominent may not only involve revealing technical details and exhibition settings but more broadly bring into spotlight the work involved in producing, curating,

installing and conserving artworks, along with negotiations and decision-making involved in this work. It presupposes a view of preservation and conservation as humanities, with their commitment to interpretation, allowing for ambiguity, uncertainty and contradictions involved in this process, and embracing the lack of fixity and singularity of works of art.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the challenges that contemporary museums face in dealing with objects that lack a stable physical identity and resist fixation in single objects, such as installations, time-based media and digital art. It was highlighted that the agency of stakeholders in many contemporary works is more dispersed, and that their conservation needs to be based on continuation or perpetuation. To achieve this, museums collect and organise heterogeneous documentation, ranging from photographs and videos of exhibitions to artists' statements, reports, notes, correspondence, technical details, and references, which become an object of care alongside the works themselves. In addition, relevant relations and contexts surrounding the work must also be considered.

An explicit link has been established between the ephemeral nature of the contemporary art object and artists' resistance to the instrumentalisation of their work by museums. As more complex objects enter museums and technical standards change, institutions register, catalogue, document, store and archive artworks and their components in complex and ever-changing networks of disparate systems. The thesis asked how museums reconcile their documentation practices with artists' demands for the contextual integrity of their works in museum care.

Conservators were identified as less visible but key allies of artists within the museum system, seeking to incorporate the artists' tacit knowledge of their work. These contacts can't be idealised, because artists, like conservators, change their minds, their careers evolve, their memories are as porous as anyone else's, and they don't necessarily say the same thing on record as they do in the creative process (Lowinger, 2023). In the examples described in this study, conservators turn to digital platforms to maintain alliances for conservation and collection care. This extends conservation into the digital space, with implications for musealisation.

The digital platforms explored in this study can be thought of as being part of the process of musealisation, as they encompass different aspects of the research and exhibition of art, as well as its selection and

conservation.<sup>197</sup> Museums select objects, study and document them with their context in a long-term perspective, they interpret and present them. Many of these initiatives grew out of questions that conservators began to ask about art objects without a fixed identity, the kind of works that need to be recomposed and reconfigured in order to stay themselves. Their identity is distributed among objects and memories, those that are kept and those that are remembered.

To explore the role of platforms in the preservation process, the thesis builds on the intersection of media studies and conservation studies, focusing on the conservation of time-based media art where platforms are used to support research, documentation and display. Operated by an interdisciplinary team, they typically function as adapted versions of content management systems, aggregating relevant knowledge and information about an artwork from multiple sources, sometimes including its digital surrogates.

The research focused on the SFMOMA Media Wiki, the INCCA network and platform, the Net Art Anthology and the Digital Canon as case studies. It sought to understand how these platforms support conservation and collection care in each case, and the implications for established museum practices. It also explored how these resources navigate between their emphasis on presentation, conservation and research, and experiment with forms of presenting research as exhibition. The study examined how digital platforms can provide a different framework for musealisation in terms of problematising the view of the museum object as a ‘mirror of reality’.

## **Findings**

The thesis describes cases where, under certain conditions, museums have chosen editing and publication on digital platforms as a strategy for art conservation. Digital platforms, in turn, are changing the way

197 This approach also rules out other types of digital platforms operated by museums: digital catalogues, which are a standard part of museum websites; audience-building platforms, whose activation is coded in the language of open calls, swarm curation and co-creation; and museum journals and other periodical publications.

museums take care for and display art. They are integral to approaches to conservation and musealisation that differ from the view of art museums as institutions that acquire and hold material-based objects. Their potential is seen primarily in facilitating a network of collaboration in the access and care of contemporary museum objects. Their role in the conservation and interpretation of contemporary art can be described as that of a medium, both for communication and presentation.

The starting point was that the art object undergoes transformation, a process that continues even after it is integrated into the museum. The museum object extends into a diverse array of components, documents, relationships and dependencies that require interpretation in order for it to be displayed or to exist at all. This array is reactivated with each display, in a process of refreshing memory about the object, both within individual institutions and in a network that transcends institutional boundaries. This concerns a spectrum of institutions: large-scale museums such as SFMOMA, government-sponsored initiatives such as INCCA, as well as non-profit organisations such as LIMA and Rhizome. Artists and a variety of other actors need to have an agency in this process.

In response, museums are integrating digital platforms into their information space, synthesising knowledge, information and data from diverse sources to interface with different departments, from curatorial to conservation to technical, with external stakeholders and even with the public. The focus is on editing as a medium for organising information, translating the art object into text and content, aligning it for publication. Editing is seen as a process that bridges the material and conceptual dimensions of the work. Museums have the prerogative to restrict access to these platforms to an inner circle or to frame them as publications.

The platforms explored tend to be highly selective and curated, presenting a small number of artworks. Most were realised as research projects, set up as collaborations between organisations, often with some degree of participation of third parties. They navigate between their emphasis on presentation, conservation and research, and often experiment with the forms of presenting research as exhibition. Although they may be run by universities or nonprofits, their rationale is not just to serve as a ground for testing preservation approaches but also to generate

value for selected works. They facilitate the activities typical of museums in general: “research, collect, conserve, interpret and exhibit” (ICOM, 2022). This definition also applies to “non-profit institutions or organisations undertaking conservation, research, education, training, [and] documentation” (Mairesse, 2017: 30).

Publishing, as a conservation strategy available to these organisations, can be seen as a form of processual conservation. It relies on documentation that interprets aspects of the artwork, resulting in a variety of documents that are further compiled and edited into coherent multimedia content. Content management systems are able to accommodate the editing process, which includes selection to reduce the complexity of the documentation, shaping content to increase its accessibility, and linking to establish relationships between different elements. In the process of publishing the content alongside selected media components of the artwork on the digital platform, the project’s objectives are aligned with the available funding policies and serve as a content filtering model that also helps to cope with the increasing differentiation in the field. The Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon examples demonstrate how selecting artworks and framing them as digital publications in terms of canonisation can amplify their impact and reach new audiences.

Interpreting digital space as a medium for granting museum-quality status to works of art may imply that the art object itself is to be regarded as documentation. In this vein, Hölling (2018) proposes to think of media artworks themselves as archives. Wielocha (2021) suggests extending this perspective to the process of musealisation, whereby museums collect contemporary works as archives, thus understanding collections of museum objects as collections of archives. This view presupposes the equal importance of authentic documentation with primary, ancillary and secondary documentation, and results in the collection of as much documentation as possible about an art object (Wielocha, 2021: 314). The example, presented in this thesis, of networks of care that facilitate digital platforms that recontextualise art objects confirms the relevance of presenting works on the basis of their ‘archival’ repertoire. However, it proposes a view of musealisation that takes into account the distributed nature of the art object, while maintaining the centrality of authentic

documentation. An art object that retains its agency through a network of care is not destined to be absorbed into the archive that accumulates in an institution.

The heart of the museum is often considered to be its collection, as it represents the institution's mission, values, and areas of expertise. What also distinguishes these platforms, is that their 'collections' are not necessarily tied to ownership. These works do not necessarily exist in a single copy, nor are they immutable. Transferring ownership is not seen as a prerequisite for preserving them. Rather, it is linked to the conditions of use of the work and related materials in the digital space, where "the legal author extends its rights and invites others to copy, distribute, and modify the work."<sup>198</sup> Its musealisation is predicated on voluntary and fair collaboration.<sup>199</sup> It is facilitated by a network of care, an alliance or a milieu that is neither contained by one perspective nor secured by one institution. As "a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society" (ICOM, 2022), the museum acts as a host, maintaining the platform and ensuring its sustainability.

## **Implications for art conservation theory and practice**

The evolving focus on interpretation and documentation in contemporary art conservation theory acknowledges that the significance of an artwork extends beyond its physical attributes. This shift recognises that contemporary artworks often incorporate temporal, performative and digital elements that defy traditional notions of material authenticity. Conservation emphasises the ephemeral and evolving aspects that contribute to an artwork's identity.

198 <https://constantvzw.org/wefts/cc4r.en.html>, accessed 16 October 2023.

199 For an example of collaboration guidelines and copyright conditions set by an artist-run nonprofit, see <https://constantvzw.org/wefts/orientationspourcollaboration.en.html> and <https://constantvzw.org/wefts/cc4r.en.html>, both accessed 16 October 2023. For an example of fair pay for artists working with museums, see <https://wageforwork.com/fee-calculator>, accessed 16 October 2023. For more on artist contracts, see Eichhorn (2009).

The documentation required to maintain and reinstall complex works requires more distributed forms of preservation and curation. The concept of ‘networks of care’ implies that the roles of artists, conservators, curators and institutions in conservation are interrelated. This framework challenges the conventional notion that ownership is the primary determinant of agency in the conservation process. Recognition of the artist’s voice and intentions is necessary to maintain the authenticity of the artwork. Artist participation helps preserve the contextual nuances of the artwork and cautions against the potential dilution of its social and cultural relevance.

The assumed role of museums as hosts of digital platforms reflects a shift in the nature of art reception and engagement. This shift recognises that contemporary artworks are not confined to physical gallery spaces, nor are museums confined to their buildings, but also exist in a broader digital ecosystem. In this context, digital platforms act as dynamic repositories that preserve the temporal and tacit elements of contemporary artworks. They accommodate a variety of media to support comprehensive documentation. The challenge, however, is to maintain these resources as artworks evolve.

But what exactly are the implications of the finding that museums choose to ‘edit’ and ‘publish’ works of art on the internet in order to preserve them? These questions plug into the conversations about the limits of art’s reproducibility by mechanical means. In ‘Museum without Walls’, André Malraux (1974) argues that high quality photographic reprints provide the means to assemble the world’s cultural artefacts in an imaginary, virtual museum. Photographic reproduction makes it possible to experience works of art and artefacts housed in museums without having to be present in the building. Not confined by physical boundaries, “a museum without walls has been opened to us, and it will carry infinitely farther that limited revelation of the world of art which the real museums offer us within their walls” (Malraux, 2018: 371). Foster (1996) describes Malraux’s proposal as primarily an art-historical device that relies “on techniques of reproduction to abstract a wide range of objects into a system of style.” Projects such as Inside Installations, Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon do indeed pursue frameworks that focus on a particular style or movement, be it installation art, net art or digital art.

But what are the implications of the transfer to digital space, where “techniques of information [operate to] transform a wide range of mediums into a system of image-text - a database of digital terms, an archive without museums” (Foster, 1996)?

Digital reproduction allows the image and text to be transferred further, into the online space, presenting digital surrogates of the works. In ‘Archives of Modern Art’, Foster (2002) compares the online reproduction of art to the Mona Lisa Syndrome. The artwork becomes even more auratic as it becomes more simulacral and in compensatory projection we are led back to the artwork in the museum. “More and more the mnemonic function of the museum is given over to the electronic archive, which might be accessed almost anywhere, while the visual function is given over not only to the exhibition-form of art but to the museum-building as spectacle—that is, as an image to be circulated in the media” (Foster, 2002). While the Internet extends the museum beyond its walls, the visual experience is physically determined by the building and exhibition design “calculated to flow cinematically, or to stream like Web pages.”

Rather, the affordances of platforms of care lie in the maintenance of relations and associations concentrated around the work. These ties are challenged and often disrupted both by the conviction that the work must be decontextualised in order to be musealised (ICOM, 2010: 62-3) and by its visual reproduction and circulation (Steyerl, 2013). The transfer of art objects to photographs in the museum without walls implies that “figures [...] in reproduction lose both their original significance as objects and their function (religious, [ritual, theatre] or other); we see them only as works of art and they bring home to us only their makers' talent” (Malraux, 1974: 46). However, digital musealisation might not be limited to restricting the function of an art object to that of art. It could seek to perpetuate the social, cultural, political and other contexts and associations in which the work is woven. It is not strictly defined by a model of producing museum quality on the basis of exclusive ownership. Projects like Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon pursue a relational model of creating a network of care, the facilitation of which they assume.

The cases discussed in this thesis suggest that it may also include practical knowledge and memory relevant to their preservation and

perpetuation. What is being distributed is not just the image of the art object, but the object itself. In the absence of a singular material object that could be considered a work of art, the museum lacks primary witnesses that would constitute ‘authentic documentation.’ Platforms can facilitate extending the status of primary witness to include the artists, collaborators, caretakers and even institutions involved in the continuation of the work. Rather than being relegated to ‘context’, they are themselves recognised as living ‘authentic documentation,’ bearers of the work’s authenticity.

## Personal communication and interviews

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Haidvogl, Martina. Associate media conservator at SFMOMA. In-person interview, SFMOMA, San Francisco, 22 February 2018 (audio recorded, author's personal archive)

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## Summary

### ***Publishing as a conservation strategy: platforms, care and contemporary art***

Contemporary art challenges standard notions and conduct in museums. Artworks such as installations, performances and digital art appear in changing iterations and their meaning is often conveyed through their intangible aspects, their biography and tacit knowledge of the artist and the museum. The recognition of the value to museums of contact with living artists has been an integral part of contemporary art conservation since its inception, in the form of collecting documentation through interviews and exchanges, driven by the negotiation of the artist intent behind the work. In this delicate balancing act between artist and museum, conservators are entrusted with the task of coordinating the creation and maintenance of documentation to support the preservation of the work, which resists fixation in single objects.

As more complex objects enter museums and technical standards change, institutions register, catalogue, document, store and archive artworks and their components in complex and ever-changing networks of systems and according to diverse protocols. The unstable form of much contemporary art contributes to the fragmentation of the infrastructure that supports institutional memory. This raises a question central to this thesis: how do museums reconcile their documentation practices with artists' demands for the contextual integrity of their works in museum care? This dilemma embodies the intricate dichotomy inherent in the role of contemporary museums: preserving artistic heritage while accommodating the changing nature of artistic expression, all the while upholding cultural legacy.

One remedy for organisations has been the pooling of resources for the development of new working methods and the co-production of documentation. Here, however, they face another obstacle. Collecting institutions as a whole are reluctant to convey practical knowledge about works of art. This is mainly for their commitment to confidentiality set out in the museum code of ethics, but also for their prevailing attitude of

concealment in preservation matters. As contemporary art enters collections, knowledge sharing between organisations is important for the development of a common frame of reference and the identification of best practices in an evolving field, but is hampered by ethical, legal and technical complexity. How do they solve this problem? Is it possible to overcome the constraints on the distribution of knowledge and documentation between institutions? And if so, how do they organise this exchange so that it is beneficial for preservation practice? To answer these questions, in this thesis I study a range of initiatives for the production and exchange of documentation and research materials on the conservation of contemporary art.

Chapter 1, “Artists and museums. Situating conservation as a community of practice,” aims to situate the institutional landscape of conservation by focusing on processes of alliance-building in the context of contemporary art conservation as a community of practice. It shows that artist-run initiatives and museums have formed collaborative preservation projects for decades. From the outset, they have responded to diverse challenges posed by video, installation, and later digital art. Among the most prominent are the impermanence and ephemerality of materials, the obsolescence of software and hardware components of art objects, and the need to preserve the artist's intent in the presentation of the work. The emerging discourse of contemporary art conservation has been shaped by theorising the shift from preserving materially based authenticity to interpretation, as well as the increasing importance of documentation. The concept of allography has been introduced to distinguish between the conceptual identity and spatio-temporal iterations of an art object. This has led to the emergence of iterative and reflective approaches to documentation.

Chapter 2, “From collection management to content management in art documentation: the conservator as an editor,” discusses the scale of the issues involved in the care of an media installation in a large-scale museum, SFMOMA, focusing on the role of collaboration and documentation. I explore their different aspects, highlighting the establishment of a cross-departmental working group and the adoption of a content management system as a site for the collaborative synthesis of practical knowledge relevant to the reinstallation of these works.

Documenting art objects on a digital platform opens up ways of bringing together the many voices of conservators, registrars, curators and technicians in articulating the contributions of their own professions to the meaning and significance of the works in their care. I describe how the process of creating an artwork's digital dossier entails the shaping of documentation in both content and form. This has parallels in the established procedures of editing, which involve the selection, shaping and linking of content. I suggest that by compiling and organising relevant knowledge and documentation about objects in this environment, museum workers take on the role of editors. I explore the implications of editing on musealisation further in Chapter 4.

While the previous chapter explored the conditions within a museum, Chapter 3, "Sharing knowledge in art conservation: from repository building to research publishing," broadens the focus to collaboration and documentation exchange between institutions. I examine a landmark initiative in this field, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), placing it in a historical context, identifying a number of motivations that have shaped its mission and form, and analysing how the rationale for collaboration in the care of collections has shifted over its two decades of existence. Not tied to a specific collection, INCCA is situated as a knowledge network facilitated by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. It was established as a digital repository for the exchange of artist interviews and documents among professionals in the evolving field. I identify INCCA as a research-based initiative and recognise its role in consolidating the conservation of contemporary art as a discipline. In the process, the means of exchange shifted from the circulation of data in the network to publicly oriented knowledge production: research publishing.

Chapter 4, "Publishing as an art conservation strategy," follows this shift through an analysis of preservation initiatives that operate online platforms. Projects such as Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon can be loosely described as permanent online exhibitions of works, together with their contexts and selected documentation. Some platforms present artworks as case studies—as vehicles for discussing conservation dilemmas and theoretical issues. Others take a more curatorial approach to presenting works. What they have in common is the activation of

conservation research to perpetuate artworks through digital publishing. More specifically, they combine exhibition display and research publishing, building on the traditions of the collection catalogue and the scholarly monograph. Although these research catalogues contain a wealth of data and information, they are primarily article-based, providing a narrative interpretation of memory and knowledge about artworks on a case-by-case basis. Whether they're facilitated by a museum, a nonprofit or a university, they are usually not limited to one or more collections, but rather facilitate relations in their networks of care.

The concluding Chapter 5 returns to the relationship between digital platforms and the process of musealisation. The platforms used to facilitate the recontextualisation and perpetuation of works of art rest on a network of care. This network is facilitated and maintained by a host organisation, be it a collective or an institution. By spatially combining the aspects of exhibition display and research publishing, platforms can give works a more active agency in social and institutional memory. Their collections are not necessarily tied to ownership, but rather to the right of use and presentation in the digital space. They offer an alternative view of musealisation that takes into account the distributed nature of an art object while maintaining the centrality of authentic documentation. I argue that platforms of care have the capacity to grant the artists, collaborators, caretakers, and even institutions involved in continuing the work the status of primary witnesses, or living 'authentic documentation.'

## Samenvatting

### **Publiceren als conserveringsstrategie: platforms, zorg en hedendaagse kunst**

Hedendaagse beeldende kunst daagt de gangbare percepties en praktijken in musea uit. Kunstwerken zoals installaties, performances en digitale kunst verschijnen in wisselende iteraties en hun betekenis wordt vaak overgebracht door hun immateriële aspecten, hun biografie en stilzwijgende kennis van de kunstenaar en het museum. De erkenning van de waarde voor musea van het contact met levende kunstenaars is sinds het begin een integraal onderdeel geweest van de conservering van hedendaagse kunst, in de vorm van het verzamelen van documentatie door middel van interviews en uitwisselingen, gedreven door de onderhandeling over de intentie van de kunstenaar achter het werk. In deze delicate evenwichtsoefening tussen kunstenaar en museum wordt restauratoren de taak toevertrouwd om de creatie en het onderhoud van documentatie te coördineren ter ondersteuning van het behoud van het werk, dat zich verzet tegen fixatie in afzonderlijke objecten.

Naarmate meer complexe objecten musea binnengaan en technische standaarden veranderen, registreren, catalogiseren, documenteren, bewaren en archiveren instellingen kunstwerken en hun onderdelen in complexe en steeds veranderende netwerken van systemen en volgens verschillende protocollen. De instabiele vorm van veel hedendaagse kunst draagt bij aan de fragmentatie van de infrastructuur die het institutionele geheugen ondersteunt. Dit roept een vraag op die centraal staat in dit proefschrift: hoe verzoenen musea hun documentatiepraktijken met de eisen van kunstenaars voor de contextuele integriteit van hun werken in museale zorg? Dit dilemma belichaamt de ingewikkelde dichotomie die inherent is aan de rol van hedendaagse musea: het bewaren van artistiek erfgoed en tegelijkertijd de veranderende aard van artistieke expressie accommoderen, en tegelijkertijd het culturele erfgoed in stand houden.

Een remedie voor organisaties is het bundelen van middelen voor de ontwikkeling van nieuwe werkmethoden en de coproductie van

documentatie. Hier stuiten ze echter op een ander obstakel. Verzamelende instellingen als geheel zijn terughoudend om praktische kennis over kunstwerken over te dragen. Dit heeft vooral te maken met hun verplichting tot vertrouwelijkheid zoals vastgelegd in de ethische code van musea, maar ook met hun heersende houding van geheimhouding in conserveringszaken. Naarmate hedendaagse kunst in collecties wordt opgenomen, is het delen van kennis tussen organisaties belangrijk voor de ontwikkeling van een gemeenschappelijk referentiekader en de identificatie van beste praktijken in een veld in ontwikkeling, maar dit wordt belemmerd door ethische, juridische en technische complexiteit. Hoe lossen ze dit probleem op? Is het mogelijk om de beperkingen op de distributie van kennis en documentatie tussen instellingen te overwinnen? En zo ja, hoe organiseren ze deze uitwisseling zodat het de conserveringspraktijk ten goede komt? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, bestudeer ik in deze scriptie een reeks initiatieven voor de productie en uitwisseling van documentatie en onderzoeksma teriaal over de conservering van hedendaagse kunst.

Hoofdstuk 1, “Artists and museums. Situating conservation as a community of practice” wil het institutionele landschap van conservering situeren door te focussen op processen van alliantievorming in de context van hedendaagse kunstconservering als een praktijkgemeenschap. Het toont aan dat kunstenaarsinitiatieven en musea al tientallen jaren samenwerkingsprojecten voor conservering vormen. Vanaf het begin hebben ze gereageerd op de verschillende uitdagingen van video-, installatie- en later digitale kunst. Tot de meest prominente behoren de vergankelijkheid en vluchtigheid van materialen, de veroudering van software- en hardwarecomponenten van kunstobjecten en de noodzaak om de intentie van de kunstenaar in de presentatie van het werk te behouden. Het opkomende discours van hedendaagse kunstconservering is gevormd door de theorievorming over de verschuiving van het behoud van materiële authenticiteit naar interpretatie en het toenemende belang van documentatie. Het concept van allografie is geïntroduceerd om onderscheid te maken tussen de conceptuele identiteit en spatio-temporele iteraties van een kunstobject. Dit heeft geleid tot de opkomst van iteratieve en reflectieve benaderingen van documentatie.

Hoofdstuk 2, "From collection management to content management in art documentation: the conservator as an editor," bespreekt de omvang van de problemen die komen kijken bij de zorg voor een media-installatie in een grootschalig museum, SFMOMA, waarbij de nadruk ligt op de rol van samenwerking en documentatie. Ik verken hun verschillende aspecten, waarbij ik de nadruk leg op de oprichting van een afdelingsoverschrijdende werkgroep en het gebruik van een contentmanagementsysteem als een plek voor de gezamenlijke synthese van praktische kennis die relevant is voor de herinstallatie van deze werken. Het documenteren van kunstobjecten op een digitaal platform opent manieren om de vele stemmen van restauratoren, registrators, conservatoren en technici samen te brengen bij het verwoorden van de bijdragen van hun eigen beroepen aan de betekenis en het belang van de werken die ze onder hun hoede hebben. Ik beschrijf hoe het proces van het creëren van een digitaal dossier van een kunstwerk het vormgeven van documentatie met zich meebrengt, zowel qua inhoud als qua vorm. Dit heeft parallelles met de gevestigde redactionele procedures, die de selectie, vormgeving en koppeling van inhoud inhouden. Ik stel voor dat museummedewerkers de rol van redacteurs op zich nemen door relevante kennis en documentatie over objecten in deze omgeving te verzamelen en te organiseren. In hoofdstuk 4 ga ik verder in op de implicaties van het bewerken voor musealisering.

Terwijl het vorige hoofdstuk de condities binnen een museum onderzocht, verbreedt hoofdstuk 3, "Sharing knowledge in art conservation: from repository building to research publishing," de focus naar samenwerking en documentatie-uitwisseling tussen instellingen. Ik onderzoek een baanbrekend initiatief op dit gebied, het International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), plaats het in een historische context, identificeer een aantal motivaties die zijn missie en vorm hebben bepaald, en analyseer hoe de rationale voor samenwerking in de zorg voor collecties is veranderd in de loop van zijn twintigjarig bestaan. INCCA is niet gebonden aan een specifieke collectie, maar is een kennisnetwerk dat wordt gefaciliteerd door de Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed. Het werd opgericht als een digitale opslagplaats voor de uitwisseling van kunstenaarsinterviews en documenten tussen professionals in het zich ontwikkelende veld. Ik

identificeer INCCA als een op onderzoek gebaseerd initiatief en erken de rol ervan in het consolideren van het behoud van hedendaagse kunst als discipline. In het proces verschoof het middel van uitwisseling van de circulatie van gegevens in het netwerk naar publieksgerichte kennisproductie: onderzoekspublicaties.

Hoofdstuk 4, “Publishing as an art conservation strategy,” volgt deze verschuiving door middel van een analyse van conserveringsinitiatieven die online platforms gebruiken. Projecten zoals Net Art Anthology en Digital Canon kunnen losjes worden omschreven als permanente online tentoonstellingen van werken, samen met hun context en geselecteerde documentatie. Sommige platforms presenteren kunstwerken als casestudy’s—als vehikel voor het bespreken van conserveringsdilemma’s en theoretische kwesties. Andere presenteren werken op een meer curatoriële manier. Wat ze gemeen hebben is de activering van conserveringsonderzoek om kunstwerken te bestendigen via digitale publicatie. Meer specifiek combineren ze tentoonstellingspresentatie en onderzoekspublicatie, voortbouwend op de tradities van de collectiecatalogus en de wetenschappelijke monografie. Hoewel deze onderzoekscatalogi een schat aan gegevens en informatie bevatten, zijn ze in de eerste plaats gebaseerd op artikelen, die per geval een narratieve interpretatie geven van het geheugen en de kennis over kunstwerken. Of ze nu gefaciliteerd worden door een museum, een non-profit organisatie of een universiteit, ze zijn meestal niet beperkt tot één of meerdere collecties, maar faciliteren eerder relaties in hun netwerken van zorg.

Het afsluitende hoofdstuk 5 keert terug naar de relatie tussen digitale platforms en het proces van musealisering. De platforms die worden gebruikt om de recontextualisering en het bestendigen van kunstwerken mogelijk te maken, steunen op een netwerk van zorg. Dit netwerk wordt gefaciliteerd en onderhouden door een gastorganisatie, of dat nu een collectief of een instelling is. Door de aspecten van tentoonstellen en publiceren ruimtelijk te combineren, kunnen platforms werken een actievere rol geven in het sociale en institutionele geheugen. Hun collecties zijn niet noodzakelijk gebonden aan eigendom, maar eerder aan het recht van gebruik en presentatie in de digitale ruimte. Ze bieden een alternatieve kijk op musealisering die rekening houdt met de gedistribueerde aard van een kunstobject en tegelijkertijd de centrale rol

van authentieke documentatie behoudt. Ik stel dat platforms van zorg de kunstenaars, medewerkers, verzorgers en zelfs instellingen die betrokken zijn bij het voortzetten van het werk de status van primaire getuigen of levende ‘authentieke documentatie’ kunnen geven.